

## HISTORICAL REPRESENTATION OF RACISM IN MARILYN NELSON AND ELIZABETH ALEXANDER'S COLLECTION OF POETRY *MISS CRANDALL'S SCHOOL FOR YOUNG LADIES AND LITTLE MISSES OF COLOR*

TANIMA KUMARI<sup>1</sup> & RAJNI SINGH<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Junior Research Fellow, Department of Humanities and Social Sciences, Indian School of Mines,  
Dhanbad, Jharkhand, India

<sup>2</sup>Associate Professor, Department of Humanities and Social Sciences, Indian School of Mines,  
Dhanbad, Jharkhand, India

### ABSTRACT

Being a black person was a curse during the 17th to mid of 19<sup>th</sup> century in the United States; they were not treated as humans rather they were described as 'beasts' and were meant for drudgery. The black men were subjugated to slavery and were oppressed but the black females were triply oppressed. They had to endure the grave problems of race, colour and gender. The paper endeavours to study the character of Miss Crandall who became a legendary figure to the millions of coloured girls who lived with a spark in their eyes to get recognized in the society, to enjoy the status of a human being as was enjoyed by the Whites. At the age of twenty-eight, Prudence Crandall started teaching the coloured girls along with the white girls. The renowned African-American poets Marilyn Nelson and Elizabeth Alexander in their poetry collection, *Miss Crandall's School for Young Ladies & Little Misses of Color* try to portray the difficult circumstances of the coloured girls who were not only denied the literacy but also the least means of adequate human lives. Through various symbols and images in the poems, the two poets have 'voiced the voiceless'. The sensibility of being black female was projected in various forms. It deals with the issues and the problems which the black women have to undergo to exist in society. The paper tries to undertake the study of different phases and facets of their lives with their teacher Miss Crandall who presents the idol picture of a true teacher and human being as well.

**KEYWORDS:** Black Feminism, Race, Colour, Gender

### INTRODUCTION

The three-time finalist for the National Book Award and acknowledged poet, Marilyn Nelson collaborated with another accomplished poet Elizabeth Alexander, winner of the first Jackson Prize for Poetry to re-capture one of the historical events of America. In the poetry collection, *Miss Crandall's School for Young Ladies & Little Misses of Color*, both the poets have beautifully blended the life history of Miss Prudence Crandall and her little coloured girls who protested against racism. Both the poets merge their poetic artistry, engaging their heart and soul in this collection. They went on to collect the lives of these coloured girls and their teacher who bravely stood up for her students. This study partakes the concept of black feminism that strives for the recognition of 'womanhood' for the black female.

During the American Revolution, many slaves were freed and the slavery was abolished but it was not the same everywhere. Both the poets try to articulate the voices of black female girls who were oppressed by the white counterparts in the United States of the 1830s. The study is important because it would also converge to justifying the black female subjectivity in the context of African-American women. Raised as a Quaker, Prudence Crandall believed that slavery is a sin. Though a white lady, she stood along with her 'little misses of color' to fight for their rights and liberation. Miss

Crandall has struggled lifelong for the rights of coloured girls. This collection pays homage to the young misses of colour along with their teacher named Miss Crandall for their untiring struggle against the racial politics of whites to create a world of equality for the black girls. But the whites ostracized the coloured girls and their teacher to maintain their imperialism over them. The urge for knowledge provided the coloured girls with strength to raise their voice against the townsmen, especially the Whites. The poems effectively describe how education of the coloured girls can bring status and stature to their worse condition. The poems also portray the industrious endurance of these girls to fight for their right to education.

The ambivalence of the American War of Independence was very much evident in the American society. The harsh lives of the black people especially the females, their dignity as human beings were denied by the white counterparts. Marilyn Nelson mirrors the plight of the black women in the poem through the words of her daughter when she says:

My mother's illiterate silence has been a death.  
I wonder if she still labors in his fields.  
His sister, dutiful but cold as snow,

(*Family*, p.3-5)

These lines draw the picture of the patriarchal system where the 'father' is the 'master' and neither the mother nor the sister have any opinion. Nelson proceeds to describe the 'Mama's unlettered silence' which is equivalent to death. The mother is said as an illiterate woman who has assertive voice and her silence is compared to 'death'. The mother is always subjected to silence and her presence is denied by her husband. Women are addressed as the weaker ones. Simone de Beauvoir opines that women are subordinated to their husbands:

History has shown us that men have always kept in their hands  
all concrete powers; since the earliest days of the patriarchate  
they have thought best to keep woman in a state of dependence;  
their codes of law have been set up against her; and thus she has  
been definitely established as the Other.

*The (Second Sex, p. 171)*

So the woman passively submits herself to the husband which is indicative of keeping the patriarchal system intact. Women allowed the males to overpower them with no resistance. The woman has been referred as the 'other', as the weaker sex and she has accepted this myth without any protest. Man has always been the 'logos' keeping the woman on the periphery. From the time immemorial, women have proved that they are as stronger as males. Even in America, when many African women were captured or purchased, some of them were forced to endure pregnancy on the slave ships. While the black women laboured in the fields along with the black men only a few black male, if any, worked along with black women in the domestic household of the whites.

The black women were bound to adopt the 'masculine' roles in the colonial America. Observers of the slave experience even said that the punishments for black women were the same as black men. It was a usual sight in the plantation fields to see a black woman unrobed, tied to the stake and being flogged mercilessly. One can say that the women of colour were equally strong as black men or even more substantial than them.

Eventually, in the Reconstruction Period in the United States, women equally took part in the struggle but their efforts were not acknowledged. They have been marginalized from the main stream of the struggle. To quote bell hooks in the *Introduction of Ain't I a Woman* which states:

Although black women and men had struggled equally for liberation during slavery and much of the Reconstruction era, black male political leaders upheld patriarchal values. As black men advanced in all spheres of American life, they encouraged black women to assume a more subservient role.

(*Ain't I a Woman*, p. 4)

There is no doubt that black women were triply oppressed not only by the white folks but by their own black men. The black men presumed that black women should limit themselves to the roles of domestic work and rearing of children. Simone de Beauvoir says in *The Second Sex* that man has the urge to control his woman so as to maintain the system of patriarchy intact. To quote her:

... the temptation to dominate is the most truly universal, the most irresistible one there is; to surrender the child to its mother, the wife to her husband, is to promote tyranny in the world. Very often it is not enough for the husband to be approved of and admired, for him to be counsellor and guide; he issues commands, he plays the lord and master.

(*The Second Sex*, p.483)

Marilyn Nelson pinpoints the subjective life of the coloured girl who casts the worse condition of her mother and then moves on to speak of her colour which is 'black', for she is abhorred by the Irish servants with whom she works. Nelson very aptly shows in her poem *Family* that being black is a crime and the Irish servants judge her by the colour of her skin:

... .. Irish servants, who hated me  
for the fatal flaw in my genealogy.

(*Family*, p.7-8)

The Irish servants criticised not only the coloured girl but also her ancestors because of being black. Being black was a curse and the coloured girl was detested. The idea of being black rather comes from the association of its culture. The black people are called ugly and barbaric. Even before the 3<sup>rd</sup> century, the term 'black' had carried negative meanings. The Christian mythology defined 'black' as ugly, devilish, evil, dark, impure; and 'white' was depicted as beautiful, godly, good, pure etc. Even the Medieval paintings demonstrated that black devils were thrown in hell by God. Historically, the colour of white and black were used to make people understand the difference between good and bad. In the beginning, the colour 'black' had no connection with the tone of the skin but gradually it was linked up by race. As Deborah Gabriel in her article *Layers of Blackness: Colourism in the African Diaspora* quotes 'white racism is the fundamental building block of colourism.' African-American people were been slaves for centuries and especially the women of color have been mercilessly tormented by the white counterparts. In this context, bell hooks opines:

In the eyes of the 19<sup>th</sup> century white public, the black female was a creature unworthy of the title woman; she was mere chattel, a thing, an animal.

(*Ain't I a Woman*, p.159)

Sojourner Truth was one of the first black feminist who advocated the social rights for black women. Education was a great tool to uplift the status of the black women. In the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, Miss Crandall started the school for young girls and her students were white. But when an African-American woman who was the housekeeper of that school asked Miss Crandall if she could attend some classes after the daily tasks, she was permitted. This paved the path for the coloured girls to get education which would “voice the voiceless” and their dreams would come true. It would help them remove the veil of darkness and enlighten their heart and soul. Miss Crandall permitted the coloured girls to attend her classes as the proper students along with the white girls. As Nelson presents in the poem *The Book* about many coloured girls from far off places who came to attend the class of Miss Crandall with new dreams:

she has followed the beckoning finger of destiny  
toward the place where she'll shoulder the burden of being free:  
*I shall learn, I shall teach*.book in her small gloved hands  
.....  
it comforts her as she watches the changing lands,  
afriend to travel with into this chance  
to bridge for her people the abyss of ignorance.

(*The Book*, p.7-14)

The book provides immense pleasure to the young coloured girl. The black girl's ultimate aim in life is to ‘learn’ and impart knowledge to her people so that they can come out of the darkness of ‘ignorance’: darkness of the heart and mind. The phrase *I shall learn, I shall teach* clearly shows the dynamic enthusiasm and determination of these girls. With their confidence, they would surpass every obstacle that come their way. She wanted to enlighten her people by bestowing the education of one's identity i.e., knowing the self. In the poem, Alexander illustrates the coloured girl's reading a song to her family from the Bible:

... .. Evenings  
Before the fire, my family tired  
From unending work and New England cold,  
They'd close their eyes. My favourite was Song of Songs.  
They most liked when I read, “In the beginning.”

(*Knowledge*, p.10-14)

The phrase ‘Evenings/ Before the fire’ beautifully builds up the image of cosiness which is enjoyed by the tired workers after their ‘unending’ strenuous routine. It also brings into account the routine lives of the slaves who are treated inhumanly and exploited to the fullest by the Whites. When the family is tired after the harsh toil of the day, the family members sit before the fire to protect themselves from the chill cold of ‘New England’. This depicts the harsh lives of the black people. And the reading of the poem from the Bible, is a kind of soothing provided to them after their fatigued day. While reading the song from the Bible, the coloured girl hopes that there shall be a metamorphosis in their condition. She dreams that one day the condition of the blacks would alter and they will be the beautiful creatures who would fly with colourful wings just as a butterfly. Further, in the poem *Good-bye Alexander* portrays in a wonderful style, the emotions of the mothers of these coloured girls. The mothers of these coloured girls want their daughters to go far away from them. They want their daughters to reach the zenith of success where the mothers were restricted. The pangs of separation are much more bearable for the mothers than to see their daughters in miserable conditions.

The coloured girls started attending the classes. One of Miss Crandall's lesson which is very vividly portrayed by Alexander is during the class when her coloured girls hear Miss Crandall talking of flying "in a hot-air balloon". The coloured girls imagine of Noah's Ark where God orders Noah to make an ark to save every species of living creature and determines to excise the world because of mankind's evil deeds. Elizabeth Alexander clearly describes the creative imagination of the coloured girls where they think that God will punish the evil-doers and there would be peace and harmony among every human beings whether they are white or black. The whole concept seems to follow a New World for these girls where they would get identification and freedom. The imagery presented by Alexander is wonderfully stated in her poem *Study*. To quote her lines:

so in our minds we fly from our classroom  
over land and water to Noah's ark,  
"The Barbary States," Queen Semiramis,  
to palaces, fortresses, sepulchres,  
and the evil, the evil that men do.

(*Study*, p. 10-14)

Miss Crandall encouraged the coloured girls and taught them along with the white girls. But the white students declined to sit beside the African-American girls. This agitated the townsmen and they protested against the coloured girls. These girls, then, recognized the utopian nature of their hopes and dreams. Nelson beautifully depicts the measures to safeguard their dreams. The coloured girls aspired to get educated, for they knew:

An uneducated mind is a clenched fist  
that can open, like a bud, into a flower

(*Fire from the Gods*, p. 6-7)

The imagery provides a dynamistic quality of Nelson's vision showing the vital power of knowledge. Education is incredibly important and key element of freedom which would empower one to fight against the trials and tribulations of life. Nelson very beautifully weaves the imagery of an 'uneducated mind' with that of a 'clenched fist' which is just like the closed room. And education irradiates the closed room with wisdom as a 'bud' blooms into a beautiful 'flower'. Nelson affirms and reaffirms the importance of knowledge. In fact, wisdom has enabled the colored girls to have faith in themselves which have provided them with true confidence. Education has opened the closed windows of the mind and in the poem, they are recognizing their potentials and have started believing that:

now I know my capacity...  
... this thirst is permanent,  
the well bottomless, my good fortune vast.

(*Fire from the Gods*, p. 3-5)

In *Miss Crandall's School for Young Ladies & Little Misses of Color*, the coloured young girls dreamt to be educated but their dreams were nullified by the town people. Miss Crandall, though a white lady believed that 'slavery is a sin' and 'defied bigotry' in Connecticut. As bell hooks in *Feminism is for Everybody: Passionate Politics* says that she is highly obligated to her white female English professor who believed in her potential and motivated her:

She encouraged me to attend Stanford. She believed that I  
would be an important thinker and writer.

(*Feminism is for Everybody: Passionate Politics*, p. 13)

But, the white folk were against the education of African-American girls. Initially, the townsmen cajolingly ask Miss Crandall to abandon the education of coloured girls which Miss Crandall sprightly denies. White girls who were the students of Miss Crandall stopped going to the school. The coloured women are denied of education while the white girls are allowed, this clearly states the racial biasness. bell hooks very aptly says:

Given the reality of racism, it made sense that white men were more willing to consider women's rights when the granting of those rights could serve the interests of maintaining white supremacy.

(*Ain't I a Woman*, p. 4)

Enraged townsmen declared protest against Miss Crandall and her coloured girls. Nelson very subtly builds a contrast between a white girl and a coloured girl. In the poem *Fire from the Gods*, the Whites revolted against Miss Crandall who is teaching these girls:

Now it's "illegal," "illegitimate"  
to teach brown girls who aren't state residents.  
As the teacher's stealing fire from the gods.

(*Fire from the Gods*, p. 10-12)

The Whites declare that education is only for the White people. According to the Whites, imparting knowledge to coloured girls is against the norms of the society. Miss Crandall is being abused for stealing the 'fire' from the 'gods.' Nelson, here, aptly depicts the 'fire' which symbolizes education that should be only restricted to the 'gods' who are the Whites.

The lines involve the sense of domination which the Whites are enjoying since ages. And, they claim the education of coloured girls as 'illegal'. The blacks suffer the pangs of slavery and the Whites justify that as proper. The imagery depicts that the Whites do not want to lose their power and control over the blacks.

The description of the lines exposes the hideous magnitude of the white people. They emphasized on the education of the white girls instead of the coloured girls. Regarding this, bell hooks enounces this difference of black and white female which prevailed in the United States:

In America, the social status of black and white women has never been the same. In 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century America, few if any similarities could be found between the life experiences of the two female groups. Although they were both subject to sexist victimization, as victims of racism black women were subjected to oppressions no white woman was forced to endure.

(*Ain't I a Woman*, p. 122-123)

Though women of colour actively participated in the movement they were treated as the 'Others'. They were the ones who were victimized by men. History is the evidence of the torments and assaults which a woman of colour suffered compared to that of a white woman. Bell hooks comments about the Feminist Movement which fought to safeguard the women's rights:

Just because they participated in anti-racist struggle did not mean that they had divested of white supremacy, of notions that they were superior to black females, more informed, better educated, more suited to "lead" a movement.

*(Feminism is For Everybody: Passionate Politics, p. 55-56)*

Bell hooks appropriately considers the fact of white imperialism over the blacks. Though the Feminist Movement was aiming to establish equal rights for women, the women of colour were discarded by the white women and the black women struggled to protect their subjectivity. The women of colour were very much the part of the movement but were ignored if not neglected. bell hooks further says:

We sought to put in place a concrete politics of solidarity that would make genuine sisterhood possible. We knew that there could no real sisterhood between white women and women of color if white women were not able to divest white supremacy, if feminist movement were not fundamentally anti-racist.

*(Feminism is For Everybody: Passionate Politics, p. 57-58)*

The imperialism of whites to dominate the black, especially the black females was prevalent to maintain the 'binary oppositions' intact i.e., the superiority of the white female over the women of colour. In the poem *We*, the coloured girls are looked down as beasts, when they say:

They see us horned, tailed, befeathered, with enormous bottoms and jaws that snap, red-devil eyes that could hex a man and make him leave home. Though the state has said no to slavery, we know how it happens with colored girls and white men, their red-devil eyes and tentacles.

*(We, p. 4-9)*

The unceasing pain always persisted in the lives of these girls. In this poem, Alexander very appropriately delineates the plight of the Black women. The white folk call the women of colour as barbaric in nature. According to the white men, the bestial description of the coloured woman as 'horned', 'tailed' with 'red-devil eyes' forces a man to leave his home. But these very white men constantly assaulted the black women. In *Ain't I a Woman* bell hooks acknowledges Linda Brent, an enslaved worker who projects the pathetic condition of her life in the autobiography. Linda describes that how her master compelled her to live in his room and told her that 'I was his property; that I must be subjected to his will in all things....' Even Kate Millet puts forth the idea that the oppressed group who are dissuaded because the whole 'power-structure' is controlled by the mighty group:

The subordinated group has inadequate redress through existing political institutions, and is deterred thereby from organizing into conventional political struggle and opposition.

*(Sexual Politics, p. 24)*

But the poet artfully displays a ray of hope to the coloured girls whose mothers have taught them how to face and fight with these problems. The mothers too want their girls to be educated so that they can breathe in the open air without

any fear. The 'key' unfolds 'something wide and bright'. The imagery of 'key' is immensely symbolic suggesting the wisdom which would open the doors wide of the closed room and enhance the room with enlightenment. Further, Nelson weaves the relationship of Miss Crandall with her students. They used to sit in a circle before the fire which is blessed. Nelson seems to invoke a sense of harmony and peace between Miss Crandall and the coloured girls in the poem "*All-Night Melodies*". It beautifully strings the 'unplayed', 'unheard' music which becomes a sound that would change every 'bigot' in the town. The poet, here, splendidly exhibits the image of silent sound of their dreams to bring transition in the minds of the white counterparts.

Teaching the coloured girls was thought to be a crime. And having done that, Miss Crandall had the trial in the court. Nelson, in the poem "*The Tao of the Trial*" describes the white lawyer who puts his allegation by saying that these girls 'openly reads books', 'gazes skyward', 'referring off-handedly to the ancient Greeks.' These girls are accused of being ambitious. These charges against the black girls acquire the dimension of racial discrimination. The white folks not only deny the literacy of the young little misses of colour but also the most minimal possibility of adequate human lives. Being an idol teacher, Miss Crandall aptly says that a teacher nurtures her students with 'simplicity, patience, and compassion.' The African-American girls were declared 'aliens' by the court. They said that the American lands belonged to the whites and not to the 'African race' to which Miss Prudence magnificently enshrines the picture of the nation which very truly belonged to black people as well. In the poem, Alexander demonstrates the remarkable contribution of the black race through the speech of Miss Crandall and shows her gratitude to the black race:

Can we call back oceans of tears and  
groans of millions of the Middle Passage?  
I tell this honorable court that we  
owe a debt to the colored population  
that we can never repay, no, never.

(*Lawyers*, p.10-14)

The court did not pay any heed to the words of Miss Crandall. And one of the coloured student was summoned to appear in the court. The prejudiced and ambiguous image of the court was vividly manifested when the judge declared to pay her fine or she would be nakedly flogged. This declaration was just because she was attending Miss Crandall's school and aspired to be a free woman. Though slavery was abolished in America after the American Revolution, the status of blacks, particularly of women was miserable. There was no law for black women to safeguard their dignity or interests. In *Ain't I a Woman*, bell hooks makes a reference to Lydia Marie Child, a white female humanist of nineteenth century who talks about the status of black women during slavery:

The negro woman is unprotected either by law or public  
opinion....They are allowed to have..., no sense of shame, no  
regard for the feelings of husband, or parent: they must be  
entirely subservient to the will of their owner....

(*Ain't I a Woman*, p. 26)

To extend the torment of the black girls and Miss Crandall, the townsmen declined to sell goods of necessity to them. The white mass invented "Black Laws" to dispel the coloured students from the school. To abandon their learning, they celebrated black laws which propagated the prevention of selling goods which resulted into starvation of the students. They poisoned the well water by the cow dung which was the sole source for drinking. Still, the endurance of these girls

was remarkable. They learned to survive even in the worst condition. Alexander presents in the poem "Hunger" that how they learnt to eat 'loaves' from the 'stone-ground meal' and prepared tea from the 'different weeds.' These girls fearlessly faced whatever atrocities or challenges came on their way. Seeing their courage, Miss Crandall determines to rear her students so that these little misses of colour can fulfil their dreams. She avers:

I have never met souls hungrier for  
learning,... ..  
Who would I be if I did not teach these  
young ladies, little misses of color?  
Know I will never no never turn back.  
My girls, we must sail above the treetops.

(*Call and Response*, p. 8-14)

The townsmen tried every possible way to drive out the coloured girls but all their attempts failed. The final blow came in 1834 when one night, the white folk set the school building on fire. Alexander, here, depicts the tragic condition of Miss Crandall and her students. To save the lives of her students, the teacher had to close down the school:

I am a teacher of colored misses,  
but I can no longer protect my students.

(*End*, p. 13-14)

The white folks destroyed the school 'utterly off its foundation.' But the fire and urge for education which Miss Crandall and her students set in the society was historical. This event set a landmark in the American history. Transition faces fatal flows but it too, brings revolution. Simone de Beauvoir says that woman must liberate herself and it must be a 'collective' effort in *The Second Sex*. To quote her:

It is this ultimate effort- sometimes ridiculous, often pathetic- of  
imprisoned woman to transform her prison into a heaven of  
glory, her servitude into sovereign liberty, that we shall observe  
in the narcissist, in the woman in love, in the mystic.

(*The Second Sex*, p. 639)

Miss Crandall and her students ultimately delineate their endurance in the struggle for knowledge. Their contribution to the struggle for emancipation was striking. Though they did not succeed in their struggle still it was a huge bolt to the white folk. It set an extraordinary landmark on women of colour who came to know that racism is no less oppressive as sexism.

## CONCLUSIONS

Consequently, the struggle of Miss Crandall to educate and emancipate her students inspired the black women to fight for their rights. It can be said that the long silence of the women of colour was given voice. Although the school was destroyed, it created the fire in the minds of black women.

As Toni Morrison says in that "certain absences are so stressed, so ornate, so planned, they call attention to themselves." Still, the land of school remains a place where one could read one of the initial revolts of American history. A group of brave colored girls along with Miss Crandall fought against the white counterparts just because they had dreamt of learning and teaching.

**REFERENCES**

1. Alexander, Elizabeth, Nelson Marilyn. *Miss Crandall's School for Young Ladies and Little Misses of Color*. Pennsylvania: Wordsong, 2007.
2. hooks, bell. *Ain't I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism*. London: Pluto Press, 1990.
3. \_\_\_\_\_. *Feminism is For Everybody: Passionate Politics*. Canada: South End Press, 2000.
4. Beauvoir, Simone de. *The Second Sex*. London: Vintage Classics, 1997.
5. Gabriel, Deborah. *Layers of Blackness: Colourism in the African Diaspora*. Imani Media Ltd, 2007.