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**The Disintegration of Class and Racial Hegemonies in
Willa Cather's *Sapphira and the Slave Girl***

A Graduation Research Project

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Abstract

This paper attempts to evaluate the aspects of hegemony manifested in slavery, racial and class discrimination etc. Which are highlighted by Willa Cather in her novel *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* (1940) in order to persuade the readers of the brutality of slavery and to demonstrate to them the way enslaved people have lived in America. It focuses on the following aspects: slaves treated as property, family separation, and physical abuse. Section one uses Gramsci's theory of consent to analyze racial and class hegemonies as well as great figures like Frantz Fanon and Edward Said. This section also sheds light on the legacy of Willa Cather, her contributions to writing generally, and the issue of slavery in particular. Section two, which aims to analyze the basis and types of racial discrimination experienced by the characters reflected in the novel and provides obvious clues as to how the characters experience racial and class discrimination by people of higher social class as well as their impact on them. Eventually, it explains how negotiation, rather than muscle power, can be used as a long-standing solution to hegemonic powers.

Section One

1. Introduction

1.1 Racial and Class Hegemony

Hegemony is characterized as a state's power or dominance over others in politics, economy, or military. Ancient Greece referred to a city-state's military and political dominance over other city-states as hegemony. It can also refer to a country's geopolitical and social control over others, from which hegemonism is derived. Currently, hegemony is defined as a situation in which one state has great material asymmetry in its favor and military power to systematically defeat any potential consent. (Kitchin and Thrift, 2009)

The key development of hegemony from military force to this modern system largely goes back to Antonio Gramsci's theory to refer to the consent of the led, which is secured by the diffusion and popularization of the worldview of the ruling class. Gramsci demonstrates how the ruling class holds power by interfering with both civil and political institutions like churches, families, and schools, as well as political institutions like the police and court. Therefore, hegemony can be marked by three structures: social, economic, and political. All three structures must be present for them to exist, just as the characters are controlled by those three structures and can't be one of them alone. According to Gramsci, when the entire proletariat consents to be ruled by the ruling class, the process of hegemony begins. By simply going about their daily lives, the working class allows

the ruling class to rule over them. This is well manifested in Cather's novel, specifically in the character of Sampson when the Miller sets him free; he doesn't accept it as he assented to or got used to being subordinated in the way that they are nothing without the help of their masters. It is true that they were brought by force, but this force no longer needs to be used as they all agreed to being slaves, that is to say they lost their own identity as regular people. Gramsci views hegemony as the process by which the ruling class propagates its ideas and gains the support of the lower class (Gramsci,1971).

In *Orientalism*, Edward Said clearly portrays world hegemony. The west considered its society to be superior to that of the east. The east is negatively classified as being alternative, sensual, voiceless, female doctoral, illogical, and backward, whereas the west is typically represented positively as being masculine, democratic, rational, moral, dynamic, and progressive (Said, 2003). As a consequence of worldwide hegemony comes the concept of race or racism, which is not a recent phenomenon. It is pervasive and can manifest in several and often overlapping forms, including personal, cultural, and institutional. However, it had profound effects on the lives of populations over the last several hundred years. Using slaves and indentured labor from racial groups designated to be "the others," who were seen as inferior and thus didn't deserve privileges, they were deprived of the right to life, basic needs, and freedoms.

However, to demonstrate more on the effects of racial discrimination and world hegemony, which are obviously shown by Frantz Fanon in *Black Skin, White Masks*, as he makes the case

that colonization, racism, and hegemony have psychological implications, It is significantly related to poor health, including the mental health, physical, emotional, and brain changes, depression, and social well-being of every individual in a society that allocates privilege based on "race'.,. Regarding the link between racism and its impact on mental health, most of the characters in the novel have mental, emotional, and psychological issues. Racism affected them in a way that when a black made a mistake before the white, they got criticized by the blacks themselves, who would say that by making this mistake, you proved the whites right as we are nothing. And that's again because western popular culture equates whiteness with purity and goodness while blackness is associated with impurity and evil, so they learn to equate blackness with evil. As a result, they grow up aspiring to be white. This effort to assimilate white culture and to negate their own black identity has profound psychological repercussions, such as developing an independent sense of identity, which in turn has a negative impact on their psychology.

Hence, it leads to a feeling of estrangement and uncertainty about who they really are and with whom they should eventually identify. Because they were taught at a young age that being black meant being subhuman, black individuals found that they had no distinguishable identity and could not identify as being black. The ambition to be white is also doomed to failure because a black person can never truly become white. And the result is that those who have been colonized or captured find themselves in an impossible situation where they are unable to both celebrate and achieve equality within the colonial culture. Fanon illustrated this

by describing the experiences of black people encountering white racism for the first time (Fanon, 2008). Eventually, black people learn that, despite their education in Western Europe and their loyalty to its ideals, white people see them as fundamentally inferior and different. They internalize this deeply ingrained message, which forces them into a painful psychological situation where they are forced to regard themselves as subhuman if they are not white. Above all, they educate their citizens that the only way to be human is to be white!

1.2 The Legacy of Willa Cather

In literature, the concept of slavery between Afro-Americans and Anglo-Americans can be divided. The Afro-American authors, who are of African descent and have a strong bond to African myth and culture, are undoubtedly connected to slavery, and they are affected by the movements against slavery. We can consider writers like Richard Wright, James Baldwin, Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, and others who have fought to end slavery and have a very critical view of it. They viewed it as the most inhuman deed carried out by the so-called intelligent beings in the universe. Afterwards, they developed slave narratives that became very important in opening debates between blacks and whites about the issue of slavery and liberty. It intended to enlighten white readers, particularly about the facts of slavery, humanity, and the rights of black people as well. Nowadays, American universities affirm the strength of this genre (Guettaia, 2016. P. 22).

However, the issue of slavery is not only recognized and experienced by non-western but western (The Anglo-American) authors as well. A writer like Willa Cather who examined various issues and subjects, including racism, slavery, African-American culture and African Americans into the entire American society. She has a greater interest in the concerns of slavery and has shown her sincere sorrow for the slaying of the slaves. She was one of the most distinguished novelists of the early twentieth century (Gaude, 2010.P.55). She was greatly influenced by great novelists like Henry James, besides she can be compared to him in some of

her works including *My Antonio* (1918), *A Lost Lady* (1923) and *The Professor's House* (1925).

If we reflect on Willa Cather's writing, we see how deeply she is committed to writing. Generating new literary works from the experiences and emotions of human life her literary works are based on the lives of regular people who live at the mercy of Mother Earth. Moreover, she doesn't write to entertain her readers but as a means to reform society. In most of her books, she deals with immigrants and their lives in Nebraska. In her writing, Cather used fictional characters as well as characters based on real people. In many of her works, Cather used members of her own family as sources for her fictional characters. Her mother, Virginia Cather, appears in the short story "The profile", where the character even bears her first name. Also, a virtue of Cather's mother can be found in a description of Thea's mother in *The Song of the Lark*, in this way that she, like, cather's mother, recognizes the exceptionality of her daughter (Vondruskova, 2008. PP. 20-22).

Virginia Cather reappears as Sapphira Colbert in *Sapphira and The Slave Girl*. Cather drew on her earliest memories of her youth in Virginia for her final book, *Sapphira and the slave girl*, which was published in 1940. According to Brown, Cather had long wanted to create a novel using her memories of Virginia and the tales she had heard there as a youngster. She eventually did so after the passing of her parents, at a time when she was soothed by her earliest memories of Virginia. *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* was composed almost entirely of Cather's memories and tales she had heard from family friends and neighbors during her childhood

in Virginia. In the epilogue of *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*, Cather claimed that the reunion narrative "was actually true, every word of it" When young Cather recounts the incidents years later, it's clear that they had a significant impact on her. Cather is very tactful in that she places a black slave girl named Nancy beneath a white woman named Sapphira. As she creates opposition between the two main characters, one is revolutionary and the other is traditional.

Willa Cather views slavery as a dilemma that requires compromise rather than a curse or reason for uprising. In *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*, she has obviously demonstrated this sense of reconciliation. Although the text is anti-slavery, the writer has shown that the issue of slavery is negotiated. In this way, Willa Cather draws attention to oppression and hatred. The current white administration in the United States treats black people with prejudice and discrimination, which are traits of slavery. However, as a thoughtful authoress, Cather leaves considerable room for rapprochement. The two families that Cather uses to depict the master-slave relationship are the Colbert and the Till families. In the opening pages of the book, the conflict between them reaches a certain climax, but towards the book's conclusion, Sapphira Colbert, the mistress, feels sorry for what she did, specifically for being indifferent to Nancy's rights. She has seen slavery in a different setting than what the average person has known. According to the author, who believed that there was enough room for compromise between the two forces of slaves and slaveholders, a trustworthy solution can be seen in this very work. The former viewed slavery as being deeply embedded in its

hexagrams. It requires a lot of strength, muscle, violent acts, devastation, and chaos. They support bloodshed, destruction of people and property, turmoil, and anarchy. Besides, the latter group believes that slavery has a chronic illness-like nature; if it is imposed and practiced, no one can upturn it. As a result of the author's realizing this, she rejected the use of violence as a tool to abolish slavery and saw reconciliation as the only viable solution to this long-standing problem.

Section Two

2. Disruption of Hegemonies Reflected in the Novel

2.1 Class Prejudice

Class discrimination or prejudice, also known as classism, is defined as discrimination that is targeted at individuals because they are perceived to be from a social class standing. It occurs to an individual because he or she is perceived to be from a lower social class (Hernandez, 2013 . P.9). It happens when, in a society, a social class tends to be understood primarily in terms of income.

All human beings have free choice in this universe, and some people live in different social classes. Therefore, one should not pressure them into obeying his rules. This example below, which was done by Mrs. Saphy, shows how she felt about rich women and white people, and she deserved all of the power. She gives the same status to black people and poor folk because they have no property or wealth. Accordingly, she gives herself all rights to decide upon one of her slave's life as to an important and personal matter like marriage for her own interest: There she told her how Mrs. Saphy had married Till off to Jeff because he was a "capon man" (Ch.1 P.5).

White people who have a higher social class can treat black people in an unnatural way and discriminate against them. They pay attention to their social ranking alone. That is to say, white people conclude that black people have strange and inappropriate attitudes and behaviors that result in negative affective and

cognitive states like depression, anxiety, low self-worth, etc (Hernandez, 2013. P. 10). Sapphira gives way too harsh words to one of her slaves only when she finds out he is barefoot: "You did? Take me out like some mountain trash. Would you? Now you get out of my sight and put on that pair of Mr. Henry's boots I gave you. Step! "(Ch.1 P.4).

It is fine for whites to make mistakes, but blacks are not allowed to make the same mistakes due to the systematic slavery system that treats them unfairly and does not provide the same punishments. It is believing that white people have the power to define the acceptable, appropriate, or normal roles for people of color while people of color lack the power to define what is acceptable, appropriate, or normal for themselves. That is to say, when she notices her nephew's boots covered with dust, she doesn't respond the same way as she did to Jeff. She should have demonstrated one social behavior for her slave without distinguishing: She happened to notice that his boots were very dusty (Ch.5 P.1).

The bourgeoisies do not appreciate the working class no matter how dedicated and hard-working they are. On the one hand, Sapphira criticizes their cook for being lazy, but on the other hand, she contradicts herself by saying that she is the only good cook in Winchester. Black people couldn't be said to be idle because they were compelled to work under violent conditions from sunrise to sunset. However, traits like lethargy and submissiveness, as well as traits like backwardness, lewdness, treachery, and dishonesty, historically become stereotypes associated with African Americans. Construction of the daily

essentials of life, including houses, buildings, ships, boats, and tools, was done by slaves. However, the ability of black people to work hard and provide as good of service in their daily lives is perceived by whites as being limited:

"Well, Henry," as she wiped her eyes with a tiny handkerchief, "I will own it to you that if it wasn't for Lizzies flirting; I would send that lazy girl off the place tomorrow. I would give her away but we have got the only good cook west of Winchester... We would never sit down to a good dinner again..."(Ch.1 P.6).

The following situation talks about the condition of black people, that they will never be rich people and will remain as workers for white people. When the miller sets Sampson free, he rejects it. That's partly because he lost his identity and self-value. He believes that he is nothing without the help of white people. They doubt their own physical and intellectual abilities. But the important question is, who has ever seen a man become rich under his master's commands? While, it is obvious that one can have a complete, successful, and worthy life without them. This analysis uses Gramsci's theory of "consent": But when it was his turn to speak, he broke down. This was his home. Here he knew everybody. He didn't want to go out among strangers (Ch.3 P.3).

Another concept for higher-class people is to internalize the dominant society's beliefs and attitudes toward the lower class, and play them out against themselves. It isolates people of color from one another, altogether, this is what the institutions, laws, and police are working for. They encourage divisions among and within groups of color. Lizzie attacks Nancy for flirting with the miller. She makes the situation more complex and challenging for

Nancy because the mistress overhears their conversation and starts to doubt and therefore plot against the poor girl:

"Lawdy, Lawdy! An, you makes his bed cumfa'ble fur him? Ain't dat nice! I speck! Look out you don't do it once too many. Den it ain't so fine, when something, begin to show on you, Miss Yaller Face."(Ch.2 P.1).

Therefore, Sapphira starts scheming against Nancy. She decides to sell her off like an object in her own interest. She gives herself the right to do so, depending on the believe that blacks are the property of whites and they are abhorrent and troublesome. Besides, she treats her according to her family lien, which is considered one of the beliefs or categories of classism or class discrimination. The quotation below supports the above:

"It's nothing to get flustered about, Henry. As you say, her mother and grandmother and great –grandmother were all Doddridge niggers. So it seems to me I ought to be allowed to arrange Nancy's future..."(Ch.1 P.1).

Everyone must take immediate, coordinated action to build a world that is just, peaceful, and based on fundamental freedoms, including the idea of equality for individuals from all backgrounds (Cotter,2016.P.8). This is exactly what is done by the miller who seriously warned his wife off against selling Nancy: "You can't sell her without my name to the deed of sale, and I will never put it there"(Ch.1 P.1).

Mr. Henry does not believe in slavery. He believes it is only the skin that makes a difference. Moreover, he knows that one day slavery will be abolished. And is curiously waiting for this day to come. Besides, The miller is seen as sign of disruption of

hegemonies in the novel. He worked hard to fight against the system and secure freedom for his slaves. Mr . Henry frequently thinks about this system and what is going on around him; he realizes that freedom is a fundamental right for everyone, hence, clothing and food are not enough for someone who wants to have a pleasant life (Ch.7 P.2). The miller is convinced that blacks should not always be slaves and subject to indignity. Therefore, he helps those slaves escape the brutality of bondage and frees all the Negros after his wife's death: "Why ain't I told you how Mr. Henry freed'em right after Missy died."(Ch.9 P.2).

2.2 Racial Injustice

Racial discrimination means any distinction, exclusion, restriction or preference based on race, color, descent, or national or ethnic origin which has the purpose or effect of nullifying or impairing the recognition, enjoyment or exercise, on an equal footing, of human rights and fundamental freedoms in the political, economic, social, cultural, or any other field of public life (Cotter, 2016.P.58).

The two common categories in the analysis of the basis of discrimination are ethnicity and being the minority group of a majority group where they are migrants. The majority group will act or treat others unfairly and tend to be rude because of ethnic differences. Based on the opinion of Theodorson, "Minority groups are groups that suffer losses due to prejudice, as well as groups that are recognized based on ethnicity, religion, and of course race" (Theodorson&Theodorson,1979). (ch.3 p.1). This is exactly what is experienced by Jezebel. One of the slaves of Doddridge who brought from Africa to America at the very beginning of the slave voyages. The quotation below shows a bit of the tragic lives of the poor black people:

Jezebel was brought up in heavy irons for his inspection. Her naked back was seamed with welts and bloody cuts, but she carried herself with proud indifferences (Ch.3 P.1).

Since everyone should have equal opportunities in life, regardless of where they were born or who their parents were, everyone should begin their lives on an equal footing (Cotter,2016.P.8). Throughout the story, Lizzie and her daughter, Bluebell, are known to be lazy and troublesome while they both

have great talents of their own, contrary to white people's opinion that they are not capable of doing anything. Instead, if they helped them out to improve their specialty they would have been completely different people than being just slaves:

Fat Lizzie and her daughter Bluebell could be heard above them all. Bluebell had a pretty soprano voice, but Lizzie sang high and low with equal ease...Neither could Lizzie read, but she knew the hymns by heart. Mr. Fairhead often wondered how it was that she sounded the letter "r" clearly when she sang, though she did not when she talked (Ch.2 P.3).

Sapphira is easily upset with her slaves, except Till. One of her favorite slaves, it is not because she truly cares for her or respects her but because Till is subservient or inferior to her mistress's commands and actions. She turned a blind eye to what was about to happen to Nancy and wasn't willing to help her out, even though it was her own daughter. Through her case, it can be argued that racism destroys the character's self-esteem and sense of self-worth. Therefore, it makes them unable to be determined in their life choices and internalizes moral ignorance to certain actions:

She understood why Nancy did not go to Till for advice and protection. Till had been a Doddridge before ever she was Nancy's mother (Ch.7 P.1).

Slaves could be treated as beasts of burdn by their masters. They are being brutally and humiliatingly punished inorder to teach the accused or guilty slaves a lesson . Cather tries to show a deeper understanding of this pain and humiliation that slaves underwent through this type of physical punishment. However, the harshness of this punishment evokes deeper emotional feelings

in the reader of both anger towards the white masters and sympathy for the slaves. Consequently, Sapphira's discriminatory actions can be proved in the way she treats her slaves generally and specifically Nancy. She easily gets upset at them or even scolds them over silly mistakes (Setyorini, 2003. P. 21).

"Take it down this minute! You know how to do it right. Take it DOWN, I told you! Hairpins do no good. Now you have hurt me stubborn!"

Then came a smacking sound, three times: the wooden back of a hair brush striking someone's cheek or arm. (Ch.1 P.1)

Among all the unfair treatments and harsh acts of Sapphira, there is a really good person, Rachel, who is against this system of slavery. She can not bear the injustice done to any innocent person around her. Rachel owns a quiet rich family possessing many slaves. on the contrary, she doesn't own one single slave. It is strange because, according to her environment, rich people had many slaves to serve them (Ch.1 P.2). She left the house because she doesn't like her surroundings and does not want to witness her mother's attitude toward the slaves. Her hatters increase when she finds out that her mother invites Martin Colbert to the house and plans to scold Nancy (Setyorini, 2003.PP. 26-27):

"Oh, Miz, Blake he will sorely ride up there an 'overtake me in the woods!" She hid her face in her hands and began to cry. "You don't know how it is, mam. He's always a-pesterin me, deed he is. I has to do his room for him, an, he's always after me..."(Ch.5 P.3)

In light of the fact that the United Nations Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination of 20 November 1963, solemnly affirms the necessity of swiftly

eradicating racial discrimination throughout the world in all of its forms and manifestations as well as of securing understanding of and respect for the dignity of the human being. Convinced that there is no justification for racial discrimination, in principle or in practice, everywhere, and that any philosophy of superiority based on racial differentiation is morally repugnant, scientifically erroneous, socially unfair, and harmful (Cotter, 2016.P.67). Nancy managed to escape and get a deserving and comfortable life. Of course, if she stayed at the Mill House, she would have faced Martin at the end and would not have been able to marry to her liking. As a result, it becomes apparent that Willa Cather tried to deal with slavery through negotiation rather than muscle power. She has seen enough space for reconciliation and found escapism as a long-standing solution. The quotation below tells us what we should do if we are surrounded by people of different skin colors. All people are the same; only their behaviors make them different. Black and white is all the same. Rachel knows all that, which is why she decides to help her out alongside her father and give the girl freedom:

"I may be overstepping my duty," she said at last, "but I couldn't sit with my hands folded and see what's going on here. She's come to me for help, and I couldn't hold back. I'm a –going to get Nancy away from here and on the road to freedom."(ch.7 P.2).

Conclusion

The paper has provided a clear overview of hegemony, which is determined as a state's authority over others in the areas of politics, commerce, and the military. Along with giving clear hints to Said's depiction of the western world as the means by which how the ruling class spreads its ideas and wins the support of the lower class, as well as Gramsci's theory of hegemony, which refers to the consent of the led, and the psychological effects of colonialism on the characters generally and the population particularly over the last several hundred years, The paper has also attempted to make a general contribution to African American authors like Richard Wright, James Baldwin, Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, and others who have fought to abolish slavery and created slave narratives to educate white readers about the realities of slavery, humanity, and the rights of black people. As well as Anglo-American authors like Cather, who believed that the only workable answer to the enduring issue was the rupture of hegemonies through reconciliation

The study has given examples of how the higher class portrays prejudices against the characters because they are thought to be from a lower social class, such as class prejudice. Furthermore, any distinction, exclusion, restriction, or preference based on race, color, descent, or national or ethnic origin that has the intention or effect of negating or restricting another person's rights is considered to be racial discrimination.

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