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Class Consciousness in the Pandemic Era: A Study with Special Reference to Katherine Mansfield's Short Story "The Garden Party"

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Abstract:

The division between the upper and lower classes has always been debatable. This study tries to establish a connection between the class consciousnesses accelerated by the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic in the backdrop of the class consciousness depicted in Katherine Mansfield's short story "The Garden Party". The Covid-19 outbreak that occurred a hundred years after the onset of modernity has certainly widened the economic gap between the haves and the have-nots in the twenty-first century. A person's class reveals the socio-economic position of the individual. At the beginning of the twentieth century, modern literary pieces depicted a growing gap between people in terms of money and social status. Mansfield's short story reveals the privileges enjoyed by upper-class people when lower-class neighbors suffered in their slums. The relevance of the theme of class consciousness depicted in the story is immense as it reveals a lot about how socioeconomic factors affect the existence of people around the world. The political regimes of various nations exercise their power to bring harmony among the citizens.

The eradication of the wide gap between the haves and the have not's is still a myth.

Keywords: Upper and lower classes, class consciousness, money and social status, socio-economic factors, the origin of modernism, Covid-19 pandemic

Introduction:

The concept of "class" gained momentum in the nineteenth-century when British society defined the social roles and status of its people. A man's social class is determined by evaluating his socioeconomic positions. It is true that we can see people of different classes in all societies. Anthropologists, sociologists and nineteenth century theorists such as Karl Marx and Weber have defined the term in a wide variety of ways:

The word "class" is etymologically derived from the Latin "classis". Roman census takers used the term

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classis to categorize citizens by wealth to determine military service obligations. In the 16th century, class got an economic connotation to denote the difference between the landed aristocracy, the bourgeoisie, and merchants on the one hand, and farmers, laborers, and servants on the other. In the 19th century, Marxism gave class its socioeconomic connotation, and in the 20th century, social scientists in the US used the term to distinguish upper and lower class based on wealth or income. (Krikke)

The stratification system talks about three main classes: upper, middle and lower. These social categories reveal the social, economic and political status of its members. All social classes tell us about their culture, clothing, food, education, employment, property, rank, nobility and so on:

In ancient Rome, for example, one group owned the land and while another was forced to work as slaves in order to get the subsistence (mainly food and shelter) required to live. Similarly, in feudal Europe, the lords owned all the land and the serfs were obliged to perform labour and military duties for the lords in return for access to a strip of land which they could farm for themselves. (Saunders5)

Analysis:

Class consciousness is a concept developed in the 19th century that shows its strong connection to Marxist theory, which rerefers a person's understanding of his own social class. It presents the struggle of a group of people of different classes. The nineteenth-century Europe witnessed the emergence of industries, the proletariats. "The three-class model of social structure in the early nineteenth century is that in which, for the sake of convenience, individuals are placed into one of three categories: aristocracy, middle class, working class" (Neale 15).

The *Cambridge Dictionary* defines the working class as follows: "[A] social group that consists of people who earn little money, often being paid only for the hours or days that they work, and who usually do physical work" (Class). The unexpected crisis has really destroyed the backbone of the world economy. The lifestyle of the working class is determined by the income they earn daily. They rely on physical labour on a daily basis and the compassion of employers to earn their daily bread. Who is the *Working Class*?

[P]eople commonly refer to industrial workers, and sometimes other kind of wage-earners and self-employed workers Usually this means a group who share similar economic situation, which distinguishes them from others, like

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property owners, employers and managers. It suggests a common interest and shared consciousness of these interests. (Holmstrom 248)

They cannot escape the uncertainty they are experiencing due to lack of financial stability. There are a large number of blue-collar workers supporting their families by doing manual labour in every country. The Industrial Revolution paved the way for the emergence of the working class in Great Britain. Although the division of people based on social class has existed for centuries, many people moved to cities in search of work and started working in factories in the 18th century. The English writer, Edward Palmer Thompson, published his seminal work in 1963 titled *The Making of the English Working Class* which narrates the emergence and involvements of the working-class people of England. The consequences of the Industrial Revolution have far-reaching effects. “[The] history of the proletariat in England begins with the second half of the last century, [19th century], with the invention of the steam-engine and of machinery for working cotton. These inventions gave rise, as is well known, to an industrial revolution, a revolution which altered the whole civil society. . .” (Engels 15). By the mid-19th century, the social roots of the country were completely shaken and class consciousness became prominent. As Kenton says,

Karl Marx described the working class as the “proletariat”, and that it was the working class who ultimately created the goods and provided the services that created a society’s wealth. Marxists and socialists define the working class as those who have nothing to sell but their labor-power and skills.

Although Marx’s use of the term *Working Class* was widely criticized, the obliteration of class divisions has not happened even in the 21st century.

With the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, the division between the upper and working-class became very clear. It has destroyed the root of our world economy. This adversely affected all classes, especially the working class, which depended on daily wages. All are suffering from the adverse effects of an unprecedented disease that has claimed the lives of millions of people. The world’s governing bodies are terrified and helpless in the face of the spread of coronavirus disease that has destroyed the world’s economic stability. “The division in our society between those of us who can keep our jobs and work from home and others who are losing their jobs or confronting the dangers of the virus ... [T]here’s a real chance that it could become more intense” (Maniyar). Industries like IT and education

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have allowed employees to work from home. However, the working class cannot enjoy this status. “Experts predict the outbreak will lead to a rise in populism” (Ncrc). Populism is a political outlook whereby leaders try to divide people into the elite and the common. This will adversely affect the social growth of a country. The economic instability of the lower and middle classes in this epidemic period creates a crisis for the governing bodies. “Realising how grave the issue of lost livelihoods due to the coronavirus shutdown could be, experts have urged Indian governments to help informal workers. Activists from India’s Right to Food campaign have suggested that each worker should be given at least Rs 3,000 per month for the period of the crisis” (Daniyal).

Studies show that financial instability has even affected their mental well-being and health. Anxiety and frustration even drive the working class to commit suicide. “A survey of 2,087 people across all wards in Mumbai to understand how the Covid-19 pandemic impacted their livelihood has found that at least 66 per cent either lost their jobs or their employment avenues were adversely affected” (Express News Service). The long-standing lockdown by the governing bodies made life difficult for the common man. The involvement of the media and social platforms highlights the plight of the working class but their lives remain the

same. They are branded ‘weak or vulnerable’ by the authorities. Such labelling or tagging will never improve their living conditions. Children belonging to this social group are not entitled to enjoy the right to education. They still don't have the facilities to attend classes.

Katherine Mansfield’s short story “The Garden Party,” published in 1922, depicts the concept of class consciousness. The story portrays the lives of people of two different classes: the upper and the lower. Laura is a girl from an upper-class family who enjoys all the privileges compared to working-class people living near her home. The story revolves around an aristocratic family, the Sheridans preparing for the annual garden party, a social event arranged for their noble guests in the summer. On the other side of the road, they have working-class neighbours at the lower level of the social hierarchy that existed in Europe in the twentieth century. Mansfield does not exaggerate the rich status of Laura’s family. However, readers can easily understand the special rights and freedom they enjoy compared to working-class men who come to set the marquee on the day of the garden party. Their physical appearance is quite different from that of the rich class. The clothing, culinary habits, interior decoration, furniture, expensive flowers and food items tell us a lot about the financial stability of Mr. and Mrs. Sheridan.

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The modern era introduced the concept of class consciousness. The aristocracy regarded themselves as people born in the highest order of the hierarchy. They believed themselves to be people with decent births. In “The Garden Party,” the author presents a third-person narrative from the very beginning to tell the story from the perspective of the wealthy class, to show the position and financial stability they usually enjoy:

AND after all the weather was ideal. . . . Windless, warm, the sky without a cloud. Only the blue was veiled with a haze of light gold, as it is sometimes in early summer. The gardener had been up since dawn, mowing the lawns and sweeping them, until the grass and the dark flat rosettes where the daisy plants had been seemed to shine. As for the roses, you could not help feeling they understood that roses are the only flowers that impress people at garden-parties . . . Hundreds, yes, literally hundreds, had come out in a single night; the green bushes bowed down as though they had been visited by archangels. (Mansfield 59)

Laura has never understood the problems faced by the workers living near her mansion. The author initially mentions the hatred of the upper-class people towards the

workers. Speaking about the physical appearance of a worker, the author says, “He was pale. He had a haggard look as his dark eyes scanned the tennis-court” (Mansfield 61). When workers come to set up a marquee for the garden party, little Laura considers them rude. Her interaction with them leads her to understand their mannerism, and she thinks they are “extraordinarily nice workmen” (Mansfield 62). Laura's initial thoughts must be the result of her upper-class upbringing. She must have heard family members talking about this working-class people. Moreover, there are servants who help Laura's mother, Mrs. Sheridan, in all household chores. The dress and lifestyles of working-class people contrast with the upper class, which spends huge sums of money importing expensive foreign hats and buying canna lilies and cream puffs to arrange parties to showcase their social status. Women wearing wide-edged hats are considered a symbol of the respectable class. During party preparations, readers can see Mrs. Sheridan presenting her daughter Laura with a “black hat trimmed with gold daisies and a long black velvet ribbon”, which she imports from another country to attend the party. They are not like the poor neighbours. They have a wide variety of food to enjoy, and that is clear when the author tells us, “Oh, impossible. Fancy cream puffs so soon after breakfast. The very idea made one shudder. All the same, two minutes later Jose and Laura were licking their fingers with that

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absorbed inward look that only comes from whipped cream” (Mansfield 69).

Young Laura is deeply disturbed by the death of a working-class neighbour, Mr. Scott. She says, “But we can’t possibly have a garden-party with a man dead just outside the front gate” (Mansfield 71). The security inside the Sheridans’ mansion is enormous. So they never know about the unhealthy and unsafe lives of the poor who live the lives of animals in their neighbourhood. The indecent language used by the working-class people makes them inferior to the affluent class. The upper-class use derogatory terms to address the working-class and the latter is considered “eyesore” (Mansfield71). As Mrs. Sheridan says, they spend their lives in little cottages or “poky little holes” (Mansfield 73). While Mrs. Sheridan’s wide and beautiful garden contains precious plants, these deprived classes grow cabbage stems and vegetables in their gardens. The sick chickens and birdcages of working-class neighbours present a dark atmosphere for readers as they show up against the bright and rich atmosphere of Mrs. Sheridan’s mansion. Mrs. Sheridan is annoyed by the disgusting and ugly sight of the low-class environment and warns children not to step into the poor neighborhood. Laura’s sister Jose expresses her frustration when Laura pleads with her mother to cancel the garden party after hearing of Mr. Scott’s death. In fact, she is a true representative of the unsympathetic

rich class. She says, “Oh, Laura!” “If you’re going to stop a band playing every time someone has an accident, you’ll lead a very strenuous life. I’m every bit as sorry about it as you. I feel just as sympathetic” (Mansfield 72). Mrs. Sheridan is also unmoved by the death of her neighbour. She is as unsympathetic as Jose. She says, ““It was a horrible affair all the same,” “The chap was married too. Lived just below in the lane, and leaves a wife and half a dozen kiddies, so they say” (Mansfield 77).None of the other characters in the story understands the bitter division between upper and lower classes like Laura. She shares a deep emotional bond with her brother Laurie. So he fully understands his sister and agrees with her when he talks about the beauty and peace associated with death, an inevitable understanding in our lives. The class division widens when Mrs Sheridan forces Laura to take the remains to Mr. Scott’s family. She reminds her daughter of the proletariat’s liking for Carum Lilies.All her thoughts and actions determine Mrs. Sheridan’s privileges compared to Mr. Scott’s family members.

Conclusion:

We can see people like Mr. Scott in these epidemic times who are losing food and shelter. They commit suicide due to poverty and low income. Often, people who belong to such social classes do not receive financial support from governing bodies. A

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well-developed institutional system for identifying such economic crises becomes a threat to the lower classes. They are unable to earn income to feed their children and support their family members. For them, death seems really beautiful, and it brings them eternal comfort. They are the true representatives of the poor in the pandemic era. At the same time, we can see compassionate individuals like Laura Sheridan who worry about the living conditions of these lower classes. They provide food, shelter and other basic things to these poor. The study concludes that cultural and political developments in the nineteenth and twentieth century's were unable to eradicate the social divisions that existed because of class consciousness. The living conditions of the lower classes remain the same in the twenty-first century.

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