

# Blacks' Struggles after Slavery in Chester Himes' *The Third Generation*

R. Sivasankari<sup>1</sup>, Dr. K. Lavanya<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Ph.D Scholar (part-time), St. Joseph's College of Arts & Science for Women, Hosur.

<sup>2</sup>Head & Asst. Prof. of English, St. Joseph's College of Arts & Science for Women, Hosur.

**Abstract:** This paper is on Blacks' struggles after slavery in Chester Himes' *The Third Generation*. Himes describes the story of a southern black family in the early 1900's, their struggle to live among whites after slavery, their expectation to get an equal right and to lead a luxury life as that of whites. Here, Taylor's family struggles hard to live a life like whites. Though, blacks are freed, they are not given full rights during that time. Many blacks want to enjoy the life of whites; so they start to bring the whites' atmosphere around them. Lillian Taylor, the wife of William Taylor, wants to be white. So, she fuses her thought on her family. In order to follow her wish, she takes effort to make everything under her control. She thinks herself as 'half white'. She wants her children to live like whites. But situations make her wishes worse. Her husband, William Taylor being a professor, moves to different location. So, the family also moves to follow his career. Lillian, as they moved to rural life setting, hates that life. She couldn't see whites' atmosphere around her. Himes has depicted the life of Taylor, their struggles to keep up between their career and their wish to lead white's sophisticated life in white society.

**Key Words:** Struggle, Black family, White Society, atmosphere, setting...

## Blacks' Struggles after Slavery in Chester Himes'

### *The Third Generation*

Chester Himes is a novelist, essayist and short story writer. He was born on July 29, 1909, in Jefferson City, Missouri. He attended Ohio State University after high school but dropped out by the end of 1926. He preferred the company of pimps, gamblers and hustlers. He pimped for his girlfriend Jean Johnson and committed crime. His behavior led to his arrest. He was sentenced to twenty five years in prison. He started to write in prison. He began to study human behavior and draw upon his own experiences to construct narratives and characters. In the 1940s, his writings reflected the anger and frustration building up in the Black community. He became discouraged as he encountered racial hostility while in the workplace. His works reflected mostly his own experiences.

Chester Himes' *The Third Generation* is mostly an autobiographical one which shows personal details of Himes and his family. And, it is also a domestic type novel which shows the domestic needs of Blacks after the end of slavery. It also shows the frustrations and reactions of the female character of the novel to lead a life of whites.

The story is concerned with an American Negro family, Taylor's family, William and Lillian Taylor and their three sons, Thomas, William and Charles. And it is concerned with life of a common black and almost 'White like' black after the slavery. After the end of slavery, all the blacks want to live a life of a white, with equal respect and rights. Even they want to lead a luxury life that of a white. They don't want a normal middle class life like

them 'blacks'. Himes has shown the struggles of blacks after slavery which he has seen, in this novel. This novel depicts the instable life of black Americans in an era when the rights were limited.

William Taylor, the head of the family, is a professor. Though the course of the story, the family moves to Missouri, Mississippi and other places. Lillian Taylor who wants to lead a life of white, doesn't like this transformation. She likes her children to follow disciplines like that of whites. She doesn't want their children go out to play. That may spoil the colour of their skin.

Many of the problems come from the struggle between William Taylor and Lillian. Lillian is mentally troubling herself by her position between the black and the white communities. She thinks that she is white enough that she shall be allowed to live as a white woman. Even she takes risks like going into town and showing herself before whites. When their family moves to Mississippi, she blames her husband for many reasons. One is, she and her sons may be darkened by the harsh sun. Second is, her sons would become wild because of rural life. Third is, they may lose the wealthy domestic life setting of whites. "She was afraid it might encourage them to hate white people. She wanted them to grow up to love and respect fine white people as she did" (10).

Through the character of Lillian, Himes has shown the domestic life of free blacks, their willingness to lead a life of white, in freedom and equality. The home as their own becomes the main thing which gives them pride in the society. That gives them a feeling that they become one among whites. This we can see in Lillian's mother and Lillian's mind. "how they had come out of slavery and made a home for themselves, and after great hardship had prospered and educated all seven of their children" (15). Then education becomes an important one. That, we can see throughout the novel, William Taylor frequently moves to different black colleges which show the importance of education.

In the first chapter itself, Himes has shown the importance of domestic life like whites for blacks.

Upstairs were three comfortable bedrooms, and downstairs the living room, library, dining room and kitchen, all furnished tastefully as befitted a teacher's home. But the library, more than any of the others, revealed both the endowments and pretensions of Professor and Mrs. Taylor. It contained four large, mahogany-stained bookcases filled with mail-order de luxe editions, leather-backed, gilt-lettered volumes, known as 'sets'. A set of Thackeray sat atop a set of Dickens, and a set of Longfellow nudged a set of Poe: a set of *Roman Classics* vied with a set of *Greek Classics*, and a set of the *Encyclopedia* contested the place of honor with a set of the *Book of Knowledge*. (7-8)

The above quotation itself shows well about the quest of black Americans to lead a well luxuries life of at least middle-class whites. The books which are decorated the room of Taylors are not purchased to read; they just represent the white culture in it. Lillian corrects the behavior of her children, their grammar in their speech. For her, the behavior and way of speaking should be like that of white. These only show them as whites. She worries because the children always play their part like Indians rather than the whites. "She was afraid it might encourage them to hate white people. She wanted them to grow up to love and respect fine white people as she did" (10).

The black American expected middle-class values are shown here. There is no peaceful, loving family inside this house. In the progress of the story, Lillian Taylor has made her husband arrested for slapping her during a fight. She has no love towards him. She calls him as, “black despicable nigger” (41). His arrest makes him to lose his job in Missouri. Then, he finds a job in Mississippi and the family moves to a new place. It is located in primeval landscape. Mr. Taylor is pleased with the home but Lillian feels, “It’s a comedown” (49).

As the story moves, William Taylor unfortunately loses his job as professor and has to take on work as a waiter. The elder brother Thomas moves to city as per his mother’s wish. So he can lead a life of whites in city. William, the second son becomes totally blind which leads to the complete breakup of the family and the home. Charles due to his behaviors, he is detached from his home. Due to the unfortunate condition in the home, William Taylor and Lillian Taylor get separated. It is mainly due to Lillian; William Taylor loses his profession, partly because she hates to return to the southern colleges where he is qualified to teach, partly, because of the economic condition and urbanization of the society.

The story moves totally changed which is not expected by Lillian. Each member of the family is left in different position. At the end of the novel, Mr. Taylor lives in a rented room. Lillian is in no better position; she too in rented room separately. Charles feels very bad on seeing their position. Their domestic settings and behavior indicate that they are completely given up. Lillian dyes her hair, Mr. Taylor drinks whiskey. These incidents show that the family has fallen from the heights of the middle class to the depths of the degenerate.

#### Conclusion:

Himes has chosen to write this domestic novel to show the life of many African Americans after the end of slavery. This shows the angry and disappointments of African Americans in their native country because they have risked their life for the democracy country but do not get access to the same at home. And, Himes also has shown his own personal experiences and his family’s through the characters. Himes describes the story of a southern black family in the early 1900’s, their struggle to live among whites after slavery, their expectation to get an equal rights and to lead a luxury life as that of whites. Here, Taylor’s family struggles hard to live a life like whites. Though, blacks are freed, they are not given full rights during that time. Many blacks want to enjoy the life of whites; so they start to bring the whites’ atmosphere around them.

#### References:

- Himes, Chester. *The Third Generation*. New York: Thunder’s Mouth Press, 1989. Print.
- Smith, Sandra Wilson. “Chester Himes’s *The Third Generation*: A Dystopic Domestic Novel”. *Southern Literary Journal*, Vol. XLI, number 2, spring 2009.