Racial Conflict Essay, Research Paper

The issue of racial conflict has caused great controversy for many centuries. Conflict which is incited by racism is often thought to be the most heinous of all conflicts because it is unfounded and based on utterly false beliefs. Racial conflict, in essence, arises when prejudice or discrimination occurs based solely on racial factors between certain races. The severe nature of racial conflict can be clearly seen by examining two distinct areas: the perception of racial inequality, as well as stereotyping. Instances of racial conflict can be drawn from two fictional literary works, Joy Kogawa s Obasan (1981) and E.M. Forster s A Passage To India (1924).

Racial Inequality exists and is maintained by differential power between a dominant and subordinate group in society. (Li p.5) This is a reality of racism in today s society. Members of one race often see themselves as being justifiably superior to other racial groups. This is clearly demonstrated in A Passage to India, when a British character states, You re superior to everyone in India except one or two of the ranis . . . (Forster p.61). Inequality has also caused certain people to be unfairly excluded from many facets of society.

But then the Club moved slowly; it still declared the few Muhammedans and no Hindus would eat at an Englishmen s

table . . . (Forster p. 83).

In the preceding passage it is stated that people other than (White) British citizens were not allowed to dine at an exclusive club. This is an obvious sign of the blatant inequality practiced by British citizens towards indigenous Indians. Even in Joy Kogawa s novel, Obasan, it is discernable that Japanese Canadians were treated unequally due simply to their ethnicity.

Strange how these protestors are so much more vehement about Canadian-born Japanese than they are about German-born Germans. I guess it s because we look different. What it boils down to is an undemocratic racial antagonism . . . (Kogawa p.82).

Historically, people belonging to racial backgrounds other than the dominant ones in society were treated differently, and often unfairly. The protagonist in Obasan, Naomi Nakane, realizes at an early age that Japanese Canadians were perceived to be subordinate to White Canadians. She states, . . . the lowly Jap will be bedded down like livestock in stalls . . . (Kogawa p.88). This comment as well as her statement, We re a lower order of people (Kogawa p.88) clearly demonstrates that Naomi not only knew of the inequality which existed, but began to believe in it as well. The antagonist of Forster s A Passage To India has a realization which is parallel and akin to that of Naomi in regards to racial inequality. Miss Quested, Dr. Aziz s alleged victim and accuser, states, He [Dr. Aziz] didn t come into the club. He said he wasn t allowed to. (Forster p.51). It is distinctly apparent that Dr. Aziz realizes the inequality which he is assigned, and like Naomi, begins to accept the perceptions of inequality as literal truths.

Another area which entails racial conflict occurs with stereotyping.

Stereotyping reflects a universal tendency to reduce a complex phenomena to simplistic explanations that are generalized to a whole category without acknowledging individual differences. (Elliott and Fleras p.104)

In A Passage To India, Dr. Aziz was berated and insulted for what appeared to be a minor oversight in his dress. . . . and there you have the Indian all over: inattention to detail ; the fundamental slackness that reveals the race. (Forster p.97). In this excerpt, Dr. Aziz was being ridiculed and his entire race was discriminated against simply because he did not affix his back collar stud , which incidentally, he selflessly gave away to a friend who did not have one. Again Indians are insulted and the same stereotypical assertion is made when it is stated, Slack Hindus they have no idea of society (Forster p.86).

Japanese Canadians also faced a barrage of stereotyping and racist attitudes which were so often directed upon them. Naomi recalls a high-ranking government official who made the accusation that . . . we [Japanese-Canadians] were all spies and saboteurs. (Kogawa p.82). This was an extremely stereotypical comment and had neither any merit nor any semblance of truth in regards to it.

In E.M Forster s literary work, A Passage To India, stereotyping was accepted as a fact-of-life from both the men and women who practiced it. While most of the stereotyping projected by men in the novel was of a direct and very blatant manner, the British women in the novel expressed their extremely stereotypical behaviour in more subtle ways. For instance, the following exchange took place at a racially integrated social event:

Please tell these [Indian] ladies that I wish I could speak their language, but we have only just come to their country.

Perhaps we speak yours a little , one of the ladies said.

Why fancy she understands! (Forster p.62)

This sort of stereotyping epitomizes the state of mind which the perpetrators existed in. The British women involved in this exchange apparently assumed that the Indian women did not know the English language, and excused members of their party for not learning their native tongue since they had just recently arrived to India. They never imagined that the Indian women, after living through years of British rule could speak the English language. This na ve behaviour once again presents itself when a subordinate Indian not only interprets what is being said between two British characters, but also summarizes and analyzes it as well, much to the awe of the British men who state,

. . . we never dreamt that an Indian could be a channel of communication between two English people. (Forster p.99)

Stereotypical behaviour seems to have infiltrated every member of society: man, woman, and alarmingly, even children. Children, feeling the need to fit in and be accepted, often mimic the actions of elders. This is illustrated in Obasan when Naomi recounts the hatred with which a young boy voiced the following accusatory statement: All the Jap kids are going to be sent away and they re bad and you re a Jap! (Kogawa p.70).

Although racial conflict encompasses issues other than the perception of inequality and stereotyping, these two issues seem to epitomize most incidents from which this sort of conflict are derived. It has been said:

Any society predicated on unequal relations, regardless of the criteria employed including race or ethnicity, can be derived as a socially stratified society. (Elliott and Fleras p.104.)

The above quote clearly shows that racial conflict arises when unequal relations or inequality exists within a society. Stereotyping is a disturbing and commonly practiced form of prejudice which often leads to racial conflict.

Stereotypes in themselves are harmless. Problems arise when these preconceived mental images give way to discriminatory practices. (Li p.219)

It is clear that once harbored, stereotypes and the perception of racial inequality lead to the manifestation of racial conflict, the seeds of which draw boundaries within society.

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