

The Changing Facets of American Novels of Romance: Interpreting the Creative Flux of Platonic Romance in Danielle Steel's Safe Harbour versus Calvinist Romance in Marilynne Robinson's Jack

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Abstract

The paper critically focuses on the creative facets of romance in Danielle Steel's Safe Harbour and Marilynne Robinson's Jack. Safe Harbour virtually harbours on mutual faith between an American widow Danielle who is also a social worker and a divorcee from New Zealand named Matt, who happens to be an artist too. In the novel, the youngest daughter of Danielle performs angelic role to bring about a transformation in thoughts and beliefs leading to the union of her mother with Matt. It seems as if the romance between them is more of Platonic than anything else leading to carrying out humanitarian responsibilities. Jack is one of its unique kinds of literary writings based on the love between two young persons Jack and Della of the two well-known races of America. With the backdrop of the controversy that juxtaposes racial problems and human attributes with the paradigm of Calvinist romance which advocates for the stability and security of a strict religious system in a world that he finds unstable and even absurd without it. It examines how the author has tactfully revealed the pre-ordained bond of love between the two characters leaving behind the so-called social and religious dogmas. There is a reference to Black Lives Matter in the novel admixed with racial trauma whereas in the thematic context, it repeatedly investigates the connection between loneliness and eternal damnation; the soul's isolation and its torment.

Keywords: Platonic Romance, Racial Problems, Human Attributes, Calvinist Romance, Racial Trauma, Soul's Isolation

Introduction to the Novels of Romance

The modern romance novel or some called it as mass-market romance novel has dates back to the romantic fiction of the 18th and 19th centuries. In Samuel Richardson's *Pamela*, or *Virtue Rewarded*, the gothic romances of Ann Radcliffe, and also in the novels of Jane Austen. In such novels, readers were shifted to a new sub-genre of fiction, which basically focuses on the lives and efforts made by the female protagonists. Initially, novels of romance attribute to heterosexual traits in which female protagonists used to challenge social norms or overcome own struggles in quest of happiness. They eventually find their loves and end the novels with happiness.

In this context, Fluck (1996) opines that "In the emergence of the study of American literature and the formation of a separate discipline called American studies, the 'invention' of the concept of an 'American Romance' has played a crucial role....It was the concept of American Romance which solved the *impasse* in matters of self-definition." (Fluck 415). Gleason and Selinger (2016) makes an in-depth study on American Romance novels and categorized them as interracial, inspirational and LGBT romance and still inquires about

“pleasurable and respectability in African American romance fiction. But, as a matter of fact, the notes and tones of romance novels are increasingly becoming philosophical and realistic with very creative blend of morale for the readers.

In the modern age, American novels like Georgette Heyer’s *Georgian-era romance, The Black Moth* (1921) and Margaret Mitchell’s *Civil War era epic, Gone with the Wind*, (1936) revitalize the general interest in romance novels, more specifically historical fiction. Modern novels of romance seem to have been adapted to a modern audience, but they continue to offer up the same lively plots, sweltering love affairs, and wonderful adventures which made them popular. In this regard, the novels of both Gabrielle Steel and Marillynne Robinson seem to possess the substances which are no doubt unique and bear the testimony of value judgement.

Faith and Freshness of Vision in Danielle Steel’s *Safe Harbour*

Danielle Fernandes Dominique Schuelein-Steel (1947-) is one of the well-known American authors of the novels of romance. Her novels are often termed as “formulaic,” and have a tendency to involve the characters in a disaster which menaces their relationships. Here, it deals with some grave problems of life subsequently reviving the spirit of the lady protagonist by leaning to be more commanding in decision making and tending to resume a life with a new life partner.

Safe Harbour (2003) is the fifty-ninth novel of Danielle Steel and one of the best-sellers in which she tells an impressive story of continued existence relating to how Matt, the divorcee from New Zealand and O Ophélie, a widow lost everything, but again find a possible way by undertaking the astonishing acts of faith and audacity resulting in the union of two families. The plot of the novel revolves round the characters like Ophélie MacKenzie, mother of Pip who is dispirited after the death of her son, Chad and her better half, Ted; Phillipa Mackenzie, the youngest daughter of Ophélie who make friends with Matthew at Safe Harbour; and it is informed that Matthew Bowles happens to be an artist and a divorcee from New Zealand coincidentally.

The novel starts on a bleak summer day when the fog gets rolled along the shoreline of San Francisco. It is noticed that one girl walks along the beach having a dog with her. She is Pip Mackenzie, an eleven years old girl who has already encountered tragic incidents in life owing to the untimely demise of her father as well as brother. After the tragic incidents, her widow mother struggles to carry the entire burden of the family. In the mean time, Pip happens to meet an artist on the harbour who can at least gives her solace in an artistic way. Although unbelievable, colorful rays of hope spark all along her pale world. In spite of childish innocence, she can well imagine of a feint world of possibility, a meeting that can bring about a transformation. Steel makes an impressive beginning by saying that nature is at its full play as its chillness and the blanket of fog covers-up the summer in northern California; the wind blows all along the long curved beach; and the clouds look sprayed across the sky as if it is blowing of sand in the air. “A little girl in red shorts and a white sweatshirt walked slowly down the beach, with her head turned against the wind, as her dog sniffed at seaweed at the water’s edge.” (*Safe Harbour* 16). When this ‘curly-haired girl’ Pip steps onto the sand of the beach and meets Matt Bowles, the readerly senses subsume of suspense, but the slow and steady development of a tender relationship between them leads to a philosophical height finally. Matt is a stranger for Pip. Later, it is known that a veteran artist from New Zealand. Although a divorcee, he finds strangely a way of ventilating his sentimental attachments with Pip. His dream to have his family is swept away with the winds ashore when his wife prefers to live with another man. Anyway, his passion of living a companionate life gets restored with his friendship with Pip as the author says, “‘Sometimes.’ She was cautious with him! He was, after all, a stranger, and she knew the rules about that. Her mother always reminded her not to talk to strangers.” (*Safe Harbour* 18). But, it is a blend of miracles and manifestations that canopies the conscience of them.

With Pip’s mother Ophélie, who undergoes a period of grief, Pip spends the summer quite lonely. But, when she meets the artist Matt Bowles, he not only offers to teach the girl to draw but also applies the life’s art to make lonely mother come round. At

first, Ophélie is thrown off balance by her daughter's newly discovered friend, but then she realizes how much of joy he is able to bring into their lives at the cost of his own suffering. The remarks of Pip are apt to quote here as she says:

He's my friend! All we did was draw together.
He didn't try to take me anywhere.

I came down the beach to see him." But Ophélie knew better, or thought she did.

She knew that a man like him would lull Pip into feeling comfortable with him,
and then God only knew what he would do to her,
or where he would take her.

(*Safe Harbour* 50).

Conversation between Pip and Ophélie continues for a long time of daily chores. As the friend executes his delicate humane touch, both the mother and the daughter slowly begin to sense good; begin to laugh; and feel like rediscovering themselves. The depth of faith and adaptability develops between Pip and Matt proportionately leading to increasing doubt of Ophélie. That leads to conflict between Pip and her mother. "And then they sat through one of their silent, painful dinners. It was the look on Pip's face that finally unnerved her mother." (*Safe Harbour* 56-57). However, the relentless and restraint actions and reactions of Matt help Ophélie change her attitude towards him. When the pleasantness of the summer ends, both Ophélie and Pip leave for the city. However, they find life without Matt is painful. At that time, Ophélie joins a volunteer job at a city outreach program for the homeless, and thus, she tries to compensate her loss, but coincidentally, she is rescued by Matt at the very critical juncture at her work place. She realises that in every matter, Matt remain vigilant and does not take pride in helping them. Rather, he allows her space and time to feel her existence with dignity, symbolically "...see a way through the mist of *Safe Harbour*." (*Safe Harbour* 102) Ophélie narrates the death account of her son and husband and Matt too shares the story of his life with her as his wife got remarries leaving small children. At the moment, Ophélie says with quiet determination that she would not want a man in her life. But, as they share the stories of their life and meet frequently, the mental distance actually gets overcome. "Their eyes met and Ophélie looked

away." (*Safe Harbour* 104). The roles of Pip the small girl turns to be purely angelic, historical and strangely mature. The author remarks on her, "She was an angel, a wood sprite, an elf, a wise little old soul in a child's body, and as he painted her, all of those qualities began to emerge." (*Safe Harbour* 176)

In a sense, Danielle Steel compassionately and gracefully explores in *Safe Harbour* the less highlighted and fragile social bonds among people. What's more, the novel is an impassioned account of complexity in mind and society that makes us away from each other. But, a series of positive efforts especially the creative and driving force of women can take us from land of mourning to the land of blissfulness making the social institutions strengthened. Both Pip and Ophélie exhibit extraordinary feminine strength and faith to dream something new.

Marilynne's Jack: A Romance with Transgression of Ideas

Marilynne Summers Robinson (1943-) is an American novelist and essayist. A receiver of the Pulitzer Prize for fiction in 2005, she has at least five highly appreciable novels to her credit. They are *Housekeeping* (1980), *Gilead* (2004), *Home* (2008), *Lila* (2014), and *Jack* (2020). Her *Gilead* series constitutes four novels like *Gilead*, *Home*, *Lila*, and *Jack* which is an "intergenerational story" about faith, race, and love coming out from the mutually related accounts of two families. It takes place in a small town of Iowa and the series is considered to be reflecting on the ideals and beliefs, contradictions, failings, and hopes of American life. This mythical world of *Gilead*, Iowa, and the beloved characters that inhabit it illuminate and interrogate the criticalities of American society.

Jack (2020) her latest novel is often called as a Calvinist romance. It is an addition to Robinson's *Gilead* trilogy because it is difficult to imagine any other contemporary writers who could achieve so unlikely a blend of doctrine and feeling. In this, Robinson focuses on Della, a school teacher and Jack, the wasteful "son in his prodigal years. He is frayed, thin and shiftless, helplessly in bondage to a sinful temperament: a liar, a thief and a drunkard." (*Jack* 8).

Getting departed from Gilead and his father, he has become a vagrant. In a small town, when it was raining, he meets by chance Della Miles who is a young schoolteacher. She is the daughter of a bishop. Remarkably enough and yet with mutual persuasion, these “strayed angels” find themselves in love with each other. Their story then undergoes some events like Jack steals a copy of Hamlet from Della’s pocket and go on sharing their view. They wrote poetry for each other; spent together whole night in a graveyard; and “...discuss Shakespeare and theology, and the matter of the stars.” (*Jack* 9). Jack sees Della drenched in the rain and then tenders an umbrella to her. Then, they sit discussing regarding life, human relationship and many more philosophical things. They very often join for tea. Although Della is the daughter of a powerful church minister, a decent woman of the town, still then, she shares the valuable feelings of isolation with Jack. The beginning of their interaction looks natural as if there is a predestined bond existing between them. This is evident from their conversation:

“Mad as I am at you.”

He nodded. “That’s why I can’t quite walk away. I won’t see you again. But you’re here now—”

She said, “I just would not have believed you would embarrass me like that. I still can’t believe it.” (*Jack* 9)

With a suppressed sense of racial discrimination, they proceed to talk to each other. Jack seems to be confident slowly and gets encouraged with the close feeling of the lady. Their conversation goes on to reach an emotional height. Jack discovers that Della in her gentle way “...was making everything easier. What would she find becoming in him? That was what he did.” (*Jack* 25). In the novel, there is frequent reference of America’s racial trauma, which began in Gilead, with Ames echoing on the life of his grandfather who happens to be an advocate of abolition of slavery.

Robinson is a Calvinist. She is probably the most famous self-described Calvinist in America. She deals with the theme of romance delicately which is reflected in the matter of love between Della and Jack which draws out of isolation and into “...that old feeling that he was enmeshed in a web of potential

damage but then became actual one way or another.” (*Jack* 123). Jack loses his room in a boarding house, and even did odd jobs. Della undertakes even greater risks. She loses her job as a schoolteacher and the respect of her entire family. And finally, they succeed.

In Robinson’s previous novels, race typically hid out of sight, though it always brought to bear a subtle, almost a drifting influence on her characters. In this novel, the issue is unavoidable and surprisingly the immediate obstacle to Jack and Della’s union. This is not because of the municipal anti-miscegenation laws, but for the obstacles of her family. A devotee of Marcus Garvey’s Black Nationalism, Della’s father tells Jack that he expects Della to devote herself “...to a certain way of life, one meant to develop self-sufficiency in the Negro race by the practice of separatism.” (*Jack* 160).

Robinson brings an end to the novel saying:

Finally a young man, with the abruptness of contained exasperation, got off the bus, and the two of them boarded. So she was with him. She would tell him that she had been delayed by her mother’s grief and her father’s alarm. Jack’s visit had done not one thing to reassure them. Della would say, “I have been disowned,” and Jack would say, “That’s just how it is for some people.” They were together, after their fashion, and the world was all before them, such as it was. And this was his grandest larceny by far, this sly theft of happiness from the very clutches of prohibition. (*Jack* 236).

Jack’s separatism makes sense against the social backdrop of the novel. As he looks at the doomed church and imagines its destruction. He “...knew that he was not only a part of society, he was its essence, its epitome.”(*Jack* 204).

Conclusion

Being the women novelists of the 21st century America, both Steel and Robinson happen to be poignant enough to have gone steps forward to strengthen human relationship, mutual faith and shape ideologies with creative life force, higher morality admixed with the healing touch of romance. In *Safe Harbour*, it is the story of the romance between two mature persons quite confidently ushered by a little

girl Pip who perhaps believes in the strength of female childish perceptions to be too noble and devoid of any malignant forces. The so called national and international boundaries of culture and beliefs are waived canopy of love, respect and mutual faith only because of the reformatory thoughts and actions of Ophelle.

In *Jack*, there are plenty of revelatory moments in the protagonist Jack, and the best belong to Della. She sees divinity less in nature than in people. Della's emotional outburst is clear when she says that in case there is an opportunity once in her life to find soul to soul relationship; a glorious presence out of place in the world. She continues saying that the soul has no history among this worldly things, no guilt or injury or failure. It is the feeling of a flame inside you. To sum up, both the novels are more of the documentaries of modern predicament in literary narratives and intellectual revelations of both Steel and Robinson.

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