

Haughty Women, Humble Town: A Study of Elizabeth Strout's *Olive Kitteridge*

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Abstract

“Haughty Women, Humble Town: A Study of Elizabeth Strout's *Olive Kitteridge* is a portrait of a small community in Maine, each character orbiting around the figure of Olive Kitteridge, a local school teacher, wife and mother. In this novel, the American writer and nationalist Strout, tries to bring out the sentimental accounts of a woman who occupies a pride of place in the community where many other women are also a part. In a rereading of the novel, one could capture the various complexities, weakness and strengths that constitute each and every human being. Strout gives more importance to town, which according to her shapes the personality of a person as well. In almost all her novels, she centers the story around Crosby, Maine a small town in America. It is in this so called ‘town’ that people tend to do what is expected of them- raise a family, settle down with steady jobs, limit their aspirations within the boundaries and comfort themselves by indulging in petty gossips. Thus in the novel, Crosby is shown as an independent world, inherently a mystery that even in all their interconnectedness and familiarity to one another, each person in this town feels lonely and disappointed. In choosing to explore the layers of one small American town, Strout continues a longstanding tradition of American literature while bringing to it an added layer of contemporary resonance. Hopefully, an attempt is made in this research paper to study the lives of several characters, notably the women, who try to come up in their life inspite of the cultural restrictions they face.

KEYWORDS: Community, Women, Town, Family, Life, Limitations, Disappointment.

At the beginning of twentieth century, American novelists started expanding fiction's social spectrum to encompass both high and low life connecting themselves to the naturalist school of realism. Elizabeth Strout, the famous American novelist of the twentieth century is also not an exception to this. Herself a native of Maine, she is rigorously engaged in exploring the social issues and she started writing down what she was doing and what she had observed in the society. Some cultural themes like life, death, morality, religion and human loyalty are predominant in her novels.

Crosby, Maine is a small town with a small population where everyone knows everyone else and their business. Rather than choosing a fictional town, Strout chooses a real town in America, to in order to present her characters real and alive. Through Strout's description of the town, one could understand that this is one ordinary town where people's lives seem to be about everyday, mundane concerns, where people find solace by gossiping about each other. Readers will find like this is not an American town, but a place where they often visit and know the citizens well. This is due to the effect

heightened by Strout's masterful realism. She has produced characters whom we come across in our everyday life.

Strout has narrated her story around Olive Kitteridge, the central female figure of the novel. She is described as a troubled soul, who rarely has a kind word for anyone, though a school teacher. She even fails conveying her love to her husband Henry or to her only son, Christopher or her students and neighbours. Thus, she seems in a way to be too haughty for the town that has always been her home. Her inability to feel content with her life and the blackness of her household tasks is often expressed through anger and cruelty which pictures her as a bad wife and a bad mother whereas she's not. It seems clear that her marriage, like most of the marriages in Crosby, was determined by the limited number of choices available in the town, when she was too young to understand the consequences. And, that is why she couldn't bear it when her son chose his wife Suzanne, a doctor out of town from Philadelphia. She was born and brought up as a country girl and so, she behaves differently in her husband's home. Olive was appalled by her "bossiness" (OK 142) at home while Olive was practiced to be under the control of her husband. It is destined to believe that people should live only in such a manner catering to the needs of the society. If they don't then they would be considered as unfit for the society. Olive is one such woman who is hated even by her only son. This is also one of the messages of *Olive Kitteridge*: "A town is not a place, it comprises the people who live there and the character and actions of those people dictate what it feels like to live in any particular location" (*npr*)

Almost all residents of Crosby crafted in such a way that they are so often in a state of pain, sadness and fear. A recurrent theme in this novel is a sense of isolation. The residents of Crosby, including Olive, struggle with their own feelings of loneliness and of psychic isolation. Americans on an estimate is found to suffer from this sense of isolation very often. This is also due to the absence of a proper family structure. Similarly, Strout builds up her characters with a sense of dignity. In the stories that make up this novel, all of the characters struggle to do the best that they can in order to lead a happy life. Thus Olive, in spite of all her longings and desires, maintains to lead a happy life with her husband in their old age after their son leave them alone and go after the materialistic world. Olive was haunted by a sense of loneliness even on the day of her son's marriage. She expected that one day their son would desert them and go for seeking better prospects. Consequently, she started finding fault with her daughter-in-law and blames her for everything. Because, She felt fear, sitting out there on her folding chair. Fear that her heart would Squeeze shut again, would stop, the way it did once before a fist punched through her back. And she felt it, too at the way the bride was smiling at Christopher, as though she actually knew him (OK 67).

Similarly Suzanne was also not satisfied with the bringing up of her husband by his town parents. She and her friend discuss Olive's shortcomings and the misery she had inflicted on Christopher as a child. "He's had a hard time, you know, and, being an only child- that really sucked for him" (OK 72).

The novel also introduces Henry, Olive's husband who on the surface seems simple. But throughout his life, he had been grappling with longings and secrets of his own. It is in fact, a yearning for simplicity which animates his actions. He longs for exactly the kind of life that the town idealizes- that which the society expects- a life with a stable marriage, loving home and a sort of some respectability. But he has married a

discontented woman who frequently infects him and their son with her depression and rage. Eventually he had a fear that someday she would abandon him. But Olive expected only a sympathetic husband who would care her always. There is so little joy in her, and she is so honest about the things that she thinks are wrong with the world and with the people. She proves to be a good wife towards the end of the novel, when Henry suffers from a stroke. As a dutiful wife, she cares him and sits with him until his last breath. But their son abandons them like normal grown up children would do when they get a better life somewhere out of their small town.

Thus, Christopher and Suzanne move to California seeking a better life. But later Olive gets to know that they are getting a divorce. But even then he does not come to care his ailing father who is on the verge of death. He makes a visit and returns immediately to New York where Olive finds people in his neighbourhood, “too artsy fartsy to believe in God, or too busy making money” (OK 207). People in cities are too stupid to understand the worth of a family life, she thinks. Later one day she shares her feelings to her friend saying,

How terrible it was when Christopher came back to visit his father in the nursing home, how terse he was with her, how he went back early- this man who was her dearly loved son... a woman could even expect her husband to get old and have a stroke and stay slumped in a chair at a nursing home. But a woman did not expect to raise a son, help him build a lovely house nearby, get started in a steady podiatry

business, the have him marry and move across the country and never move home again, even when he found himself deserted by a beast of wife. No woman, no mother, expected that. To have a son stolen away (OK 168).

Christopher is never found coming back to his native till the novel ends. He goes on his own way, leaving his old lonely mother uncared. He becomes so selfish in the materialistic world that he did not even care to know whether his parents are alive or not. Though worried, Olive has to go ahead with her life. Hence, she has to overcome all her misfortunes. All these years, she spent her life for her husband and for her irresponsible son. But, no one is there to take care of her at present. Her son too, is found blaming her for his own troubles and shortcomings, whereas Olive at this old age yearns for a compassionate heart than a blaming one. There is a subtle emphasis on the fact that children grow up and leave the parents while it is a spouse, who is always there as a companion. Thus Christopher marries again and Olive's primary relationship is always with Henry, who, for better or worse, she chose to live with him.

When Christopher and Olive end up in a fight, it is stated that, “Children don't choose their parents, but parents don't choose their children either” (OK 215). As the novel proceeds, Olive is seen longing for death as the pain of loneliness is severe than death. Every morning, she goes to the river and she would walk three miles in one direction and three miles back. It is here where she meets Jack Kennison, a retired professor whose wife had died recently. He was also alone suffering loneliness as much as Olive had been. He falls on the sand unable to bear his grief and that is when Olive goes to his rescue. As days go on, they begin to spend time together. In effect, two lonely old people have found each other and as a result have found a reason to carry on with their lives. “The best thing about Olive is her forthrightness, her ability to see more and more of herself” (OK 281). Finally, she gets a sympathetic husband atleast in her old age. After seventy years of finding fault with everyone, Olive finally admits that she is not

always right. Almost too late, she realizes that life is short and love is too important to be wasted. It is hoped that, with her realizations of the world, Olive would lead her life happily and expect not too much too quickly.

In the guise of Olive, Strout explores how in a society, bounded by cultures, women deal with all of the problems that life can bring: staying in a marriage, growing old, living with adult children and so on. Though Crosby is described as a small town, where there is no scope for any development, towards the end of the novel, the town is on the verge of transformation. Strout desperately reveals how hard every person in the world is working to get what they need by exploring a little town of Crosby. In *Olive Kitteridge*, the community for women has changed and there is more scope for her unlike her other novels. Though Olive feels suppressed at the beginning, she gets molded up in such a way that she takes her own decision to go with Jack Kennison. Women are confronted with different opportunities in the twentieth century American life. In colonial America women had only a few rights. Married women were not even allowed to own properties and had no legal right even to their own inheritance. Women were expected to be pious, pure, submissive and domestic. However, the condition of women in the twentieth century America has changed a lot. Davis in *Conflict and Consensus in Early American History* says,

“The American woman had her choice- she could define her rights in the way of the women’s magazines and insure them by the practice of the requisite virtues, or she could go outside the home seeking other rewards than love. It was a decision on which, she was told, everything in her world depended” (246).

Other than Olive, there are descriptions of many other women like Nina White, Angela O’ Meara in the novel. They are all characters whose beginning is tragic and they are people who come to a better understanding of the society as the novel moves towards the end. Strout wants to reveal through her novel that, the world has changed a lot especially for women and they need not struggle for dignity. They are expected to come out of their residences, work, earn and be happy. They have their own right to choose their own path as Olive and other women in the novel does. Eventually, Strout ends up the novel in a positive way where women have self-esteem and strength to overcome their misfortunes.

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