



Chance and Serendipity in the Novels of the Female Pulitzer-Prize Winners

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Female authors have been quite successful when it comes to the esteemed Pulitzer Prize in Fiction in the U.S.A. In the 21st century alone five female authors have won the prestigious award: Marilynne Robinson for *Gilead* in 2005; Geraldine Brooks for *March* in 2006; Elizabeth Strout for *Olive Kitteridge* in 2009; Jennifer Egan for *A Visit from the Good Squad* in 2011; and Donna Tart for *The Goldfinch* in 2014. In the last year of the last century, the award was won by another woman of Indian origin, Jhumpa Lahiri for her world-famous *Interpreter of Maladies*. This research paper will concentrate upon the five female authors who won the award since 2001.

Their relative success as compared to the Booker Prize and to other prizes all over the world is starkly contrasted with the feminist narrative in their works. Female authors who come from cultures which are not very receptive of feminist narratives tend to focus excessively on those very themes. They are overwhelmed by the feminist themes and rarely venture outside it. They rarely see a woman as a human being.

In cultures where feminist ideas are commonplace and women have sufficient freedom, the female authors tend to be less feminist in orientation and instead view and portray female characters more as individual human beings rather than as representative of a gender. This is true of the American female authors, considering the Pulitzer Prize winners in fiction, particularly in the 21st century. As mentioned above, there have been five female Pulitzer winners since 2001, and none of them have particularly feminist themes.

Marilynne Robinson's *Gilead* is about theological struggles of the primary character Ames. His family is Calvinist. There are other fronts which carry on the symbolical and allegorical themes of the story. The narrative spans through three generations with his grandfather's engagement in the Civil War, his father's struggles and his own loneliness. His own flaws reveal his humaneness, a seeming peculiarity in Calvinists.

Gilead has a religious theme with allegories littered throughout the novel. The hero's struggles are illustrated by many quotations from the Bible and also by many famous Calvinist theologians. Calvinism became a heresy in mainland Europe and survived in pockets in northern lands.

Robinson is trying to stress that Calvinists are human beings like others and they also have feelings, unlike the stereotyped image of the Puritan Calvinists who despise material pleasures and lead a singularly austere life. Ames revels in remembering the transcendental pathos originating from his small moments of pleasure and peace, as well as pain and chaos.

After every hardship, Ames is able to revel in the physical and the natural beauty of the world, the solace of a modern man, whose life is almost devoid of religion or spirituality. The commonplace and the everyday phenomenon is good enough for him to go on. He declares that he wants his son to, "to live long and... love this poor perishable world."

The Calvinist doctrine, being essentially a Christian creed does not recommend meditation but instead calls upon austere living and believing the Word of God. In the modern times, the belief has been shaken and now the Word of God is not as believable as it was until a hundred years ago. Hence the sophistry of the Calvinist theologians has turned towards other articles of faith. Robinson is a believing Calvinist and through Ames' thoughts she tries to show that how mundane things are God's work and things to adore and love like the street talking of a few friends. The novel is full of such seemingly frivolous but theologically sophisticated arguments.

Thus, *Gilead* is a redemptive novel about the human nature of Calvinists and it is also a restoration of faith in the Calvinist creed by the new interpretation of the theology, a love affair of God, a belief in the Word of God through marvelling at the mundane affairs of life. It is also about the beauty of chance in life and how it can turn into serendipitous events, where one suddenly finds epiphanies of happiness in mundane events of life.

The Australian-American author Geraldine Brooks won the Pulitzer Prize for fiction in the following year of 2006, for her seminal work, *March*. It is a novel about the American Civil War. It is inspired by Little Women of Louisa May Alcott, which is about the women and girls who remain at home and tend after the house while the men go to war.

In a modern twist, *March* is about the father of the girls left in Little Women, the father who is fighting the war. It is about the gruesomeness and the ugliness of war, as the father reveals through his letters how horrendous war is with all its violence and bloodshed. There are graphical scenes of horror where the crows pick the eyes off the bodies of the dead soldiers and other such similar scenes. He talks about only the gruesomeness of chance, which can never turn into a serendipitous event, quite unlike the religious theme of *Gilead*.

March is considerably different in approach. It is themed upon the prolonged moral exhibitionism, where the culprits are war and slavery. It is about the role of chance in life which is much more influential than Providence. It is a style of modern writing where classical 18th and 19th century classics are reinterpreted, devoid of their puritanical and religious themes and focus on themes misrepresented and left unrepresented, through humanitarian and politically correct point of view. It does not present a ray of hope but tells about the cruelty of chance in life.

Once again, a female author does not at all talk about women, but instead she takes a novel about women and turns it upon its head by telling the story of the men that are fighting the war and not the women who stay at home.

Elizabeth Strout won the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction for her celebrated novel, *Olive Kitteridge* in 2009. *Olive Kitteridge* is a literary delight to its readers. It depicts life in a coastal town of Maine, one of the centres of Ivy League culture. It depicts the life in a typical neighbourhood of north-eastern United States, conservative, flush with natural resources and richer than the average American. Though, the book is presented as a novel, it is in a series of connected short stories. The books show the meaningless and chancy events in life which create tragedy and the net of life.

"One story takes place at the funeral reception of a man whose wife has just learned of his infidelity. Another features a hostage-taking in a hospital. Elsewhere, an old lover surprises a lounge pianist, sending her reeling back into painful memories. An overbearing mother visits her wary son and his boisterous, pregnant wife. Most stories turn on some kind of betrayal. A few document fragile, improbable romances. They encompass a wide range of experience."

Olive Kitteridge has a woman as the primary character, though it does not harp upon feminist themes. She is an unlikable woman who is not apologetic of her behaviour, and also calls people names in a rude language. But even she is dependent upon the chance events in life for thrill and pleasure. There are other characters like her in the book, but she is the one who comes out strongest through the pages. The eponymous character muses about the loneliness and unfairness of life and recognizes that happiness is a synonym for serendipity; that it one can become happy only through a series of fortuitous ac-

cidents. Since people do find true happiness in a long life and happy marriage, these serendipitous events take place and that is the hope of life.

Jennifer Egan won the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction in 2011 for *A Visit from the Goon Squad*. It follows the modern narrative and defies categories as a result. It is not clear whether it is a novel or a collection of related short stories. The line between these two disciplines of fiction writing had been all too visible until recently, but in these Pulitzer Prize winning novels of female authors, it is blurring. The author prefers to call it a novel, hence stressing upon the connectedness of the stories.

The novel takes the inspiration of its name from the 'Good Squads' who beat up anyone who was opposed to certain political machines and labour unions. In this novel, the name is given to anyone who unfairly treats someone. Through the stories of the cruelty of chance, the central theme which finally emerges is that time itself is a good squad. It beats up people unfairly, breaks them and makes them dejected and depressed without happiness. Egan revealed in an interview that "In an interview, Egan explained that "time is the stealth goon, the one you ignore because you are so busy worrying about the goons right in front of you." Unlike Strout's *Kitteridge*, this novel by Egan does not at all believe in serendipity, but only in the cruelty of chance.

Donna Tartt, the latest and the current winner of the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction was included in the Time Magazine's list of the 100 Most Influential People in the World. She won the Pulitzer Prize in 2014 for *The Goldfinch*. It is the serendipitous story of a small boy who is bereaved in his childhood when his father abandons him and his mother. His mother dies in a terrorist attack while she and her son are visiting an art gallery. In the ensuing confusion reminding oneself of the magical realism, the boy steals a precious painting by the name of 'The Goldfinch'. The painting becomes the pivot of chancy and serendipitous events in his life which finally bring him peace after decades. It is a long and winding novel, but one with such strangely engaging story. It also does not talk about feminist themes, but rather dwells upon the human condition as such, as portrayed through the chance and serendipitous women.

At last, one can say that the 21st century female authors who have won the Pulitzer Prize are not focussed upon the feminist themes but rather portray the human condition as such.

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