

The Struggle for Self: Ethnic Identity and Cultural Inequities in *Kristin Hannah's The Women*

K Sherin Fathima,

Research Scholar,

Register No:241112002037

Department of English and Research Centre,

Sarah Tucker College (Autonomous)

[Affiliated to Manonmaniam Sundaranar University],

Tirunelveli-627007, Tamilnadu,

India. Contact # 9894249151, email id:sherinkstcresearch@gmail.com

Dr S Felicia Gladys Sathiadevi,

Research Supervisor,

Associate Professor and Head,

Department of English and Research Centre,

Sarah Tucker College (Autonomous)

[Affiliated to Manonmaniam Sundaranar University],

Tirunelveli-627007, Tamilnadu,

India. Contact # 9843441516, email id:feliciamanoah@gmail.com

Abstract

This paper explores the themes of ethnic identity and cultural inequities in Kristin Hannah's *The Women*, examines how the characters deal with their individual identity issues in spite of societal and historical boundaries. The article explores how the intersectionality of gender and ethnicity impacts the experiences of female characters, particularly in the face of trauma, oppression, and societal expectations. By using feminist theory, postcolonial discourse, and identity formation theories, this study examines how *The Women* depicts the effects of cultural inequities on self-perception. This paper investigates the complex relationship between cultural belonging and personal identity through a detailed examination of the lives of the protagonists, especially in the setting of marginalised ethnic groups. By focussing on the intersections of race, gender, and class, this study provides light on the constant struggle for self-realization and independence within a strictly defined cultural framework as well as the profound emotional and psychological effects of cultural discrimination. *The Women* becomes a potent reflection on the determination and transformative opportunities of reclaiming one's identity in the face of strong societal injustices when viewed through this lens.

Keywords: Ethnicity, cultural inequities, societal injustices, oppression

The paper examines the lives of its main female protagonists, who experiences the harsh reality of cultural and ethnic inequities in a patriarchal and

ethnocentric surroundings in Kristin Hannah's novel *The Women* (2024). In her novel she emphasizes the ways in which personal histories and larger social structures of inequity shape identity, especially ethnic identity. In *The Women*, the women must navigate and negotiate their sense of self in a world that threatens their autonomy, whether through hidden cultural marginalisation or overt discrimination. Kristin Hannah is a well-known and prolific writer who is known for her profoundly emotional and gripping tales. She was born in Southern California, on September 25, 1960. Through her poignant works that often deal with themes of love, tragedy, and resiliency.

Hannah has gained reputation in modern literature. Beginning her writing career in the early 1990s, Hannah has authored a number of works in a variety of genres, including contemporary drama and fiction. . Hannah's writing is distinguished by its emotional depth and its focus on the human condition. Her books vividly depict various people in unexpected situations, reflecting her interest in historical events and emotional challenges. Hannah's work is effective and relevant because she offers a perspective on historical and contemporary issues through her stories and characters. With an emphasis on the protagonists' continuous fight for identity and agency in the face of structural oppression, this essay examines how ethnic identity and cultural injustices are depicted via their experiences.

Hannah had an interest in writing about the Vietnam War for 30 years, which lasted from November 1, 1955, to April 30, 1975, which was an intricate and momentous struggle. It involved South Vietnam, which was supported by America and other anti-communist allies, and North Vietnam, which was controlled by the communist regime of Ho Chi Minh. But the novel did not really come to life until March 2020. During the COVID-19 lockdown, the rising panic, struggles and the anger as shown on the television reminded the author of the struggles of the medics during the Vietnam war. Moreover, the nurses and doctors combating the pandemic on the front lines were overworked, exhausted, traumatized and in many cases as they were unsupported despite making such enormous sacrifices for the rest of the people to fight the pandemic. The disparity of those incidents reminded her of the Vietnam War and its nurses. Hannah wanted to shine a light on the nurses who served in Vietnam and also explore the larger context of a changing America through her narrative. She also wanted to show that protests could be considered a patriotic act. Protesting for the right cause in the right way can have a positive outcome.

The Women is a tale of the 1960s, a challenging and revolutionary era in American history. It is also an epic story of a nation driven apart by politics and conflict of a generation driven by dreams but lost on the battlefield. Moreover, it is an intimate portrayal of a woman coming of age in difficult times. It uses the

narrative of a persistent lady who went to war to narrate the story of all women who risk their lives to save others. Their sacrifice and commitment to their country have all too often been forgotten. A generation is defined by the remarkable idealism and bravery of the protagonist Frankie McGrath in *The Women*, who remains strong during turbulence times in a well-drawn tale of piercing insight and lyrical beauty. Frankie McGrath, a twenty-year-old nursing student, hails from a prosperous family and was raised by strict parents on the beautiful island of Coronado, California. She believes that while men are out at war, women belong at home. She did not give it any thought until her brother's friend Rye Walshin told her that "women can be heroes too." She has always taken great satisfaction in being a good girl and doing the right thing. However, when the world changes in 1965, she finds herself considering a different path for her life. She follows her brother's lead and impulsively seeks recruitment in the Army Nurse Corps when he ships out to serve in Vietnam. In course of her tenure at the warfront, Frankie will learn the genuine meaning of female friendship and the pain that can result from love.

Feminist theory, especially as expressed by theorists like Bell Hooks and Judith Butler, shows how gender works in institutional settings like the military as a control mechanism in addition to being a social category. Frankie McGrath's womanhood is simultaneously idealized and ignored in the hyper-masculinized society she enters in *The Women*. Even though she performs vital medical work, men soldiers and commanding leaders undercut her authority because they believe her body is unsuitable. In *The Women*, ethnic identity is a significant factor in determining the women's lives. Sustaining their ethnic and cultural identities while facing the imposition of societal norms which often aim to erase or marginalise their past is the main obstacle they face on their journey. Ethnic identity becomes a tool for survival and resistance in a society that tries to stifle it, in addition to being a subject of personal significance. Because of the relationship of their ethnic identities with gendered norms, the protagonists search for selfhood is complicated.

The roles that women need to play are a further manifestation of the cultural injustices they come across, in addition to discrimination based on race or ethnicity. A greater sense of alienation results from these expectations, which frequently restrict their autonomy and mobility throughout society. In negotiating cultural barriers to self-expression, the paper focusses at how these women's ethnic backgrounds become a source of pride and anxiety. The relationship between gender and social inequality is one of the *Women's* main concerns. In addition to being oppressed by external factors because of their ethnic identities, the novel's protagonists are also bound by societal norms that specify their responsibilities as women. Gender inequality is a widespread problem, and this work examines the ways in which women's ethnic oppression and cultural expectations interact. Hannah exposes the widespread societal injustices that happen beyond of the

battlefield via *The Women*. When Frankie, Ethel, and Barb come home, they face social rejection and are not given the identical status and respect as their male peers. But Barb receives noticeably worse care. Barb must deal with the persistent racial biases of American institutions, such as the Veterans Administration, the healthcare system, and public opinion, while white female nurses like Frankie struggle for recognition as veterans.

Ethnicity in *The Women* is more than background it's a central theme that adds depth to the novel's feminist perspective. Through Barb, Hannah critiques racial injustice, challenges the whiteness of historical memory, and amplifies the voices of Black women veterans. By doing so, she not only tells a more honest story about the Vietnam War but also confronts the cultural systems that continue to **exclude and erase based on race and gender**. *The Women* is not simply a story about war; it is a story about the **struggle for visibility** to be seen, heard, and remembered. Hannah's depiction of female military nurses shows how gender roles constrained women during wartime, but it is through **intersectional analysis** that the novel's full critique emerges. *The Women* successfully restores the voices of women in the story of the Vietnam War. It is more than a gendered narrative of the trauma of war. Although, it is a critique of the cultural and racial injustices that characterise national remembering and military service. Hannah explores the double hardship that women of colour carry whose service is doubly marginalised by gender and race, through Barb's character and the novel's larger racial dynamics. By doing this, *The Women* challenges us to reconsider how we create historical narratives and who is ignored.

References:

Primary sources:

Hannah, Kristin. *The Women*. CPI Group (UK) Ltd, London, 2024.

Secondary sources:

Crenshaw, Kimberlé. "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color." *Stanford Law Review*, vol. 43, no. 6, 1991, pp. 1241–1299.

<https://mimiblog.org/2024/02/29/the-women-by-kristin-hannah-a-book-review/>

Sarah Collins | Book Review | *The Women* | 22 March 2024.

<https://sarahcollinsbookworm.wordpress.com/2024/03/25/book-review-the-women-by-kristin-hannah/>

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Women_\(Hannah_novel\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Women_(Hannah_novel))