

A Study on the Theme of Immigrant Experience in Annie Proulx's *Accordion Crimes*

R.Rajeshwari.

M.A., B.Ed.,M.Phil.,SLET., Assistant Professor,
Department of English, Bharathiyar Arts and Science College (W), Deviyakurichi.

Abstract:

The novels of Annie Proulx are unique. The novelist stands apart from the contemporaries. The experience of immigrants in a foreign country makes them alienated and isolated. It makes them feel different who never belongs to neither their own culture and their nation nor new nation and culture. The novel *Accordion Crimes* consists of eight different chapters and each has different characters. These chapters don't possess any relationship between each other. The linking thread of the entire novel is the "green accordion".

Key words: human relationship, alienation, isolation, changing of names

Introduction

The striking stylist Annie Proulx (1935-), crafts stories of struggling northern New Englanders in *Heart Songs* (1988). Her best novel, *The Shipping News* (1993), is set in even further north, in Newfoundland, Canada. Proulx has also spent years in the west, and one of her short stories inspired the 2006 movie *Brokeback Mountain*. Some of her novels and short stories collection: *Heart Songs and Other Stories* (1988), *Heart Songs* (1994) *Postcards* (1992), *The Shipping News* (1993), *Accordion Crimes* (1996), *Close Range: Wyoming Stories* (1999), *That Old Ace in the Hole* (2002), *Bad Dirt: Wyoming Stories 2* (2004), *Fine Just the Way It Is: Wyoming Stories 3*, *Bark-Skins* (2015). The film adaptations of some of her novels are: *The Shipping News* (2001) is directed by Lasse Hallstrom and features by Kevin Spacey as the protagonist Quoye, Judi Dench as Agnis Hamm and Julianne Moore as Wavey Prowse. *Brokeback Mountain* (2005), directed by Ang Lee and starring Heath Ledger and Jake Gyllenhaal, is based on a story of the same name in Proulx's collection of short stories, *Close Range*. In *Accordion Crimes*, Ms.Proulx vastly expands her range in both space and time. Her third novel possesses the kind of sweep that Hollywood calls epic, America in between.

In the “Accordion Maker” begins in 1891 with the accordion maker in Sicily, who remains nameless throughout the novel. He is poor but talented craftsman who wants to make his fortune as a musician, as an instrument maker. He plans to move with his family to ‘La Merica’ due to the paralysis of his wife, he has left his daughters and wife in Sicily. His eleven year old son, Silvano and he start their journey in order to earn money in order to save his wife. In the train, he is misguided by the stranger to move to New Orleans, so they feel their pleasure of attaining their success after reaching the place in spite of their destination to New York. They are unable to speak American language ; they work under the Italian bosses. One night the accordionist and his son are jailed with other Italians. The local chief police suspect them of a murder in the place. They remain in jail for several months because of lack of American language. Before they arrest, the accordion maker has met a German farmer in need of an accordion so that the farmer gives a penny to him. It is the period where the Europeans leave their own place and fall in the hands of the swindlers and in the land of America. The accordion maker is a victim of circumstance, violence arising between anti-Catholic and an anti-immigrant feeling is common to this place. He is killed by anti-Italian mob. But his son Silvano is brilliant, who aptly changes his name to Bob Joe to make survival in the land of America by the necessity of his life and he also learns American ways. He finds work on a boat. While he is working, an Indian’s arrow pierces his throat. From him, the accordion passes to Apollo, a black musician and he is the first customer of the accordion makers. Thus, the accordion maker and his son Silvano are the immigrants to America. Accordion maker being unable to adapt to the language and ways of America he meets with his end. But his son is practical, changes his name, finds a job and learns American ways. These show the sufferings of the immigrants.

In the *Goat Gland Operation* brings the three Germans together. The three Germans are Ludwig Messermacher, Hans Beutle and Williams Loats. They are occupied in an unoccupied place on the riverside of Iowa in 1893. This place is abandoned twice for the immigrants to settle. Due to hardships they undergo, they resettle and name the place as Prank. They show their success in farming and music. They have named their music band as ‘Three Germans’ and they are very popular. But they are disliked by everyone because they are all Germans and not of American origins. People turn on Germans to attack completely. Messermacher’s son Karl is a telephone operator, who is attacked by a group of local mob. Houses were burnt and people throw stones at three German’s family. Even after the war ends, his eleven year old twin daughters are raped by the mob and the years pass. The news they receive is Reds, Jews, Catholics, and other foreigners are allowed to marry Americans but not Germans so, Karl changes his name to Charlie Sharp. So that he finds life easier than Karl Messermacher. In 1924, his father changes his family name to Sharp. They move to Texas to grow cotton. He takes the green accordion with him. It is a gift from Beutle years ago. The different ethnic groups react to their neighbours. It also gives us the idea of success and prosperity of being immigrants in America.

In *Spider, Bite me* concentrates on the role of spider in killing the character. The protagonist is Abelrado Relampago Salazar. He is a great accordion player who purchases the accordion in the barbershop window in 1924. He writes stories. His interest in the music makes him move towards Conjunto music. He teaches his son to play the accordion and he asks him to play with him at the parties. But he never allows his daughter even to touch the instrument. During the celebration of her fifteen birthdays, she runs away. The celebration of her fifteenth birthday represents the transition from childhood to womanhood. She kicks the accordion with the knife indirectly saying to her father about the partiality of that instrument. His wife is Adina, who insists her children to find job apart their places. She names her children as Americans. Conjunto music has become the powerful musical symbol of the working class. This music remains popular over a century till 1920. Abelardo dies of three spider bites. Baby becomes a popular musician, numerous records and starts travelling to various countries. Felida criticizes Baby for playing father's old conjunto music and she calls the button accordion as the instrument of unsuccessful men, of poor immigrants and failures. Conjunto music is his father music. Ethnic stuff is Felida's music.

In the *Hitchhiking in a Wheelchair*, Dolor Gagnon plays a major role. He has a frustrated life in searching for the lost family. But unknowingly his twin sisters and brothers live in the same place in the same building but in the different rooms. He lives in an orphanage in Rattle Falls, Maine. In the fourth grade, he gets teased by the people. So he insists the director of the orphanage to change his name into a regular one. The director prefers Franks or Donald. He chooses Frank. Orphanages directed handed an envelope to Frank he opens the package and finds a wrecked accordion. This is the only property to him left by his father in America. He wants to repair his father's accordion.

In 1955, he from suffers semi- paralysis in his legs. Dolor finds the little green accordion in a Chicago taxi where Baby left. Dolor tries to teach himself the accordion and tries to find the connection with the past life. One day, he travels to Montmagny in Quebec where he meets talented well known accordionists. Few months later, Dolor loves Emma whose husband dies in a truck accident. Dolor's legs are paralyzed. He stays at home, occasionally wheeling him or hitchhiking into the town. He meets Emma's sister Mitzi, she tells him to pray at the shrine of St. Jude to remove the pains from him. She offers him a tiny silver leg if it is healed, he promises to give up playing the accordion. Due to his strong faith, he walks again. He and Mitzi get married. Delphine calls Dolor to her deathbed but never reveals that she is his mother. He finally reconnects with his lost family. He believes that his happiness would not last any longer and he commits suicide with a note 'I am happy'.

In *Don't let a Dead Man Shake You by the Hand*, deals with the stories of two distant families. They are linked by geography and a passing acquaintance with one another. They are Cajun, Male Foot and Octave. Male Foot's male relations find work in the oil rigs of Louisiana. Their stories are linked with Octave, a musician and fisherman. Octave's family moves from slavery up to the civil rights era. The little green accordion is in the hands of Buddy Malefoot. He buys it from Emma. Many settled in Louisiana, their language and culture are intermixed. Lamb is a single mother who works in the kitchen of a white college President's house; she raises her three children Octave, Ida and Marie Pearl. Octave becomes a musician and buys the little green accordion from Buddy \$250. Octave takes it to Chicago playing Zydeco. Blues is the famous music of that period. Ida is an angry girl, tall, ugly and fat. Ida collects the stories and the possession of black women. In 1960, she joins the civil rights. Ida moves to Philadelphia. For thirty years she does the same work, could not help anyone in crime, violence and injustice for the black people.

In *Hit Hard and Gone Down* speaks the role of the little green accordion. In 1950, Mrs. Przybysz from Chicago's polish community head buys a cigar maker. Her husband leaves the family. The neighbourhood immigrants are moving slowly one by one towards the city. But she remains till 1970. Hieronim is her eldest son. Joey the grandson of Mrs. Przybysz is fond of family stories in the old country. Americans think that the immigrants are dirty; illiterate peasants, the men drink and women are without morals. They do not consider them even as animals. Being immigrants, Mrs. Przybysz tells Joey it is very difficult for a man to maintain his place and dignity in a foreign country. Hieronim changes his family name as New Comer. He changes his as Harry. Joey's wife name is Sonia. Their children are Florry and Artie. Joey's mother Dorothy complains of the moving of the neighbourhood to different places. As a young couple, Sonia and Joey have started playing accordion during the 1960s and the 1970s. On their way to Chicago contest, they miss the instrument. Sonia and Joey win the first prize of \$1500. He buys the little green accordion as a gift for his wife. Joey's family then moves to Texas.

In *the Color of Horses* deals with the re-emergence of dead and buried horse and old Egypt. In 1980, Josephine with her finance Vergil moves from the New York to Montana. They pick up the green accordion in Chicago. They are going to see his parents for the first time after their wedding. She has shot her father's prized horse Appaloosa. Vergil is already divorced from a nurse. As they drive, Jo tells Vergil stories about the family and the skill of horses and kindness towards her. Josephine parents are from Montana. Their house is built in western style. Josephine's parents Bette and Kenneth arrives in Montana from Boston 1953. Fay advices him to purchase the horse on the spot. Kenneth's breeding operation is a success due to umbrella point because it is the prize-winning horse and thus becomes the family mainstay income. The only passion she and Vergil are to have physical pleasure Jo stays in Montana and she marries a rancher.

Then the free accordion passes to Fay by Jo and it passes to Basque shepherd and then to pawnshop. The color of horses has a grotesque quality. Fay and Jo play major role when compared with other characters.

In *Back Home with Reattached Arms* deals with the Norwegian immigrants. Ivar Gassman, the grandson of Norwegian immigrants. The place and situation around Ivar represents that he is homeless. He is described as a familiar figure in old glory, Minnesota in 1970. He is a man who provides useful things as unwanted. He re-repairs and repurposes those items. He sells them to tourists earning multi-million dollar. He buys the old house. Ivar discovers many treasures, original art, antiques and cash. He ends up his business by making \$111,999 profits. This chapter is connected with the previous chapter by Remington painting. The story is titled as the tragedy by Ivar's daughter Vela and her brother Conrad. Being a teenager she is fond of old music. Her father finds it is a strange thing. The little green accordion is picked up by a neighbour for Ivar's antique store. He gives it to Vela with a bag full of old time accordion music cassette tapes. The green accordion is picked out of the landfill by a garbage man, Whitey Kunky. Finally accordion ends up on a truck in Mississippi transporting garbage. While travelling Whitey throws the accordion from the window. The accordion road and it is remaining on the crushed by an eighteen wheeler. The \$1000 bills are flying through the air. It is the end of the accordion. It simply states the injustice and violence. In *Accordion Crimes*; Proulx wants to show the problems of the identity of the non-natives (immigrants) of America.

Annie Proulx's *Accordion Crimes* is a novel which raises the question of identity as an American and who is considered to be the American. The novel also stresses the domination of the Whites in several places: they never allow the immigrants to live freely, they are not employed in higher jobs and even they are not considered as equal to them as a human being. Thus fate plays a vital role in the life of the non-natives i.e., immigrants of America. The talents of the immigrants are not appreciated or recognized. Immigrants, the treatment and approach have given to them by the natives will stay on the mind of the readers as only slaves even though they are talented or educated. They accept their lives in America as slaves in order to make their family live in a comfort zone. *Accordion Crimes* is a novel that deals with the social issues throughout. The end of the story shows the labour of nameless and faceless people who never get any opportunity to grow or involve in the growth of a country like America. The people of such immigrant background tend to change their names for the better living in America. Thus changing of names has played a vital role in the novel. Starting from the *Accordion Maker* to the last *Back home with Reattached Arms*, each chapter is different with their setting and their characters. Annie Proulx stands apart from her contemporaries for bringing out such a novel.

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