

# Social Stratification in Suzy Mckee Charnas' *Walk to the End of the World*

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## Abstract

This paper attempts to trace the footprints of Social Stratification in Charnas' ground-breaking novel *Walk to the End of the World*. Charnas covers a wide range of social and gender themes to bring out the palpable realities that pervade time and space. Upon reading the text, this research provides an exploration of the portrayal of gender inequalities. Narration taking place from different forms and voices in these novel highlights the importance of the counter narratives to comprehend the objective truths. Having acquainted with the flow of the plot provides an understanding of misogyny culture in the post-apocalyptic dystopian future. Drawing upon her experience, Charnas introduced the reader to fantasy, science-fiction, and horror events.

Living in a culture that provides the freedom to express the wings of voice, there has always been a monster in all courses of history to haunt and choke the voice and those wings from emerging. Charnas' novel, *Walk to the End of the World*, offers a timely narration of the underrepresented gender and their degraded condition throughout the novel. Her depth of insight with reference to the truest condition of womankind under the monstrous clutch of men is truly impressive. Having an avid interest in cracking the common framework of preconceived prejudice in society, Charnas has always made efforts in her novels to sow the seeds of genuine and logical counter-narratives through her brilliance. Her sharp view of characterization, in a way, provides an intimate look into the characters devoid of obscurity. She unravels the plot in this novel with curtains of characters: Captain Kelmz, the Rover Captain in a mission in search of the DarkDreamer in the community, Servan D Layo, the DarkDreamer and a free wheeler, Alldera, the dauntless woman in the community. This remarkable novel awakens the slackened consciousness, showing the dark side of the holdfast community and its culture, and leaving a note of the cruellest image of the untold oppression of women. The story revolves around the misogyny culture. The plot penetrates the intricacies of gender relationship and their inequalities. Charnas stages the story upon a dystopian setting to highlight how disparities within culture wreak havoc on the well-being of individuals. The people who live in Holdfast struggle to manage their lives with the seaweed and kelp that they work with by farming.

Alldera is the only character in the novel that gains the hope amongst the fems in the community. Alldera emerges in the later part of the novel and changes the course of the plot. Sharing food with the other carry-fems and a meal with Moonwoman, a divine mistress of the moon, shows how kind she has been to the weak community. She comes forward to shoulder the carry-fems' burden. Fems in the dystopian setting

are considered to be the weak women. Carry-fems are so grateful for what Alldera has done in their lives. Fems are restricted and oppressed by the monstrous men. The time in which they live is so precarious that muteness is enforced upon fems. It is deemed fashionable that the spirit of subjugation is demanded among the masters. Delving into the characterization of Alldera, on one side, she is the symbol of hope for the fems, and on the other side, she is terribly exploited by the master—the DarkDreamer. Whenever she works under the master, he takes advantage of her through manipulation and exploitation. She finds herself helpless in controlling the violation of men over women. The so-called fems are forced to encounter horrific violence and subjected to stern treatment as if they were slaves. She is, in this novel, portrayed as a female slave, pursuing a persistent mission to stand by the side of ordinary fems. Holdfast witnesses irreparable destruction in the beginning, where women are considered solely responsible for the havoc incurred. The Holdfast society is formed with different sects of people such as Elders, Juniors, and Seniors, who are given an unequal distribution of opportunities, rewards, and privileges. The significant disparity in the community serves as proof of the prevalence of social inequality. It is commonly believed that, in order to stabilize the social order in society, women must be controlled and stripped of their freedom. In *A Discourse Upon the Origin and the Foundation of the Inequality Among Mankind*, Jean-Jacques Rousseau conceives about two distinct species of inequality among men. One is natural or physical inequality and the other one is moral or political inequality. He says, “This species of inequality consists in the different privileges, which some men enjoy, to the prejudice of others, such as that of being richer, more honoured, more powerful, and even that of exacting obedience from them.” (Rousseau).

Charnas underscores the problem of gender relationships and brings an alarming set of attitudes to the fore. The problematization of gender and social fissures has been highlighted and brought to light. This novel serves as the building block for the next three novels in the Holdfast series. The characters are stratified into different rankings based on multiple criteria such as social class, power, and gender. Servan D. Layo, the DarkDreamer and the master, climbs the social ladder to exercise his power over the weak. He pulls all the strings to become accustomed to the ritual of the DarkDreamer; by doing so, he believes it will help strengthen one’s soul. Not only does he push into it, but he also prepares to take others into the same ritual by drinking ‘imanna-beer,’ which is believed to be the strength of the soul. This process is followed by the dreaming of daring themes. D. Layo manipulates others to give up their personal preferences in dreaming and jumps into maneuvering and making others shrug off their dreams to take control over their fate. In the later part of the novel, he acts as a master and dominates every fiber of Alldera’s thoughts and actions. People believe that the early destruction occurred owing to the witchery of fems and point fingers at them. This is followed by a horrendous act of burning rebellious ‘unmen’ or the ‘fems’ in order to gain power.

The next phase of stratification that Charnas deals with in the novel is that fems are forced to be used for breeding purposes by the leaders of men in the group. Monstrous men think that the ultimate purpose of a woman ends after giving birth to babies. To them, there is no other genuine purpose in the lives of women. Women are deemed fit solely for breeding purposes. This jolting attitude recalls the year 1932, when the most popular work of utopian fiction *Brave New World* by Aldous Huxley was published. The book was written between the two World Wars. The novel opens with a utopian world in an effort to create a futuristic society in which people are structured and engineered through the manual creation of different classes, ranging from Alpha Plus to Epsilon. Human life is shown to be entirely man-made and industrialized. Women are forced to take steroids because they are expected to give birth according to the requirements of the ‘World State’ policy. Aldous talked about social stability in his work. He goes on to

say that, “No civilization without social stability” (Huxley 31). However, in his novel, women are assigned only submissive and undervalued professions. This highlights the pathetic condition of women on the ladder of social life. One common aspect found in both these novels is quite bizarre. In *Brave New World*, the relationship between father and mother, son and daughter is considered shameful and unnatural. In *Walk to the End of the World*, a son must not make an effort to know the name of his father. Enquiring about names leads to unnecessary and untold trouble, as it could cause a disparity between the father and the son. They view each other as enemies.

The novel shows that the formation of society is only possible through the division of social and gender categories on Earth. Huxley used his brilliance to shape the typical proclivities and tendencies of advanced human beings to create artificial human reproduction. Such actions are undergirded by the belief that they maintain social stability. According to them, social stability is possible when humans are created devoid of emotions. Women must get married at the right age, failing which they will be considered outcasts from the community. Women, by birth, are stratified to take up menial roles in society. Here, fems are specifically used for breeding rather than for any other purpose.

Ancient men lived with varying degrees of power and used it to accomplish things in life. Inequality exists not only between male and female but also among men within the group. So far, Servan, as a young man leveraging his immeasurable power over the weaker sex, is, for the first time, shocked to see that Eykar wields enormous influence over him. Alasdair Macintyre in his book, *After Virtue*, talks about the inequalities and the justification of inequality. He says, “He believes more generally that all inequality stands in need of justification and that the only possible justification for inequality is to improve the condition of the poor and the deprived.” (Macintyre 245). He explained that any inequality that fails to contribute to the upliftment of the underprivileged people in society is unjustified. Here in this novel, this thread of truth is not reflected in the plot. This is one thread of truth about social stratification in society. Eykar is constantly threatened with living in jeopardy at Boyhouse. When he was young, Servan was put down. This shows that man is predestined to undergo such a phenomenon at some stage in life. Here, domination is inevitable. No one looks to live free under the absence of personal and social hegemony. To put in other words, man lives constantly under the pressure of oppression or hegemony. No man is free until his soul is freed from the bound of this world.

Charnas awakens readers to the terror of Holdfast, where fems are treated violently and subjected to untold suffering and pain within a patriarchal society. In order to hide their incapacity to grow crops and their failures, the men claim that fems are responsible for the crop failures. Owing to food scarcity, there is huge tension between Seniors and Juniors. Seniors stealthily take away a great amount of food to keep for themselves, which has led the Juniors to starve. The men use fems as an outlet for their despondency and failures. Their aggression is directed toward the weaker sex. Men use power as both a tool and a weapon against women, and failure to do so leads to abuse of women, both physically and psychologically. This attitude of men is well portrayed in the novel. If the fem-gang shows any sign of resistance to the manipulation of men, they are forced to pull carts loaded with sand down the streets. They are made to sweat blood to get the work done. Biased treatments are often associated with culture, religion, gender, and sex. When these associations intersect, they shape a true picture of a dystopian world. This is evident in the novel. Questioning or resisting power ultimately exhausts the spirit of the ordinary fems in the novel. Continuous rebellion without the weapon of rationality leads to a humiliating defeat. Over the past five years, adult fems in Bayo have continuously fought against the weeding-out process, leaving them feeling estranged and alienated. The truth is that these young fems do not possess the robust power to taste victory.

Either their irrationality or the ignorance of knowledge will be the reason behind failures in all their attempts. Having seen the poor condition of the young fems arises the question of what led them to this state. They have always been under continuous subjugation and servitude. The attitude of making weaker sex feel inferior and bringing them under the patriarchal domination of servitude has always been the goal of men. This is the tool that they use so that they can get their labor. Alldera, being more skillful than the other powerful leaders in the community, is always jolted by a sense of suspicion that the young fems, by mistake, may be misdirected into the Wild, a place even more dangerous to survive.

Suzy Charnas, using language to decipher the underlying image of the thirst for power, sounds very impressive. Uncovering the hidden connotations of the language and the strong tone of the characters grasps the filament of truth behind and between the text's lines. The pivotal character of Captain Kelmz lacks clarity and acuteness in articulation, and thus he fails to keep his own juniors in his grip. In fact, he is the first narrator in the plot; however, he lacks the skill and knowledge to counter Layo's vociferous mockery. When thought and language are married, they give birth to true knowledge. In a way, the Captain seems one step behind D. Layo. When a character is deemed amateurish and inept, regardless of gender and social status, they suffer under the clutch of dominant voices. Having taken individual characterization into account, class struggle is the melting point of stratification in the community. Characters tend to identify with one another regarding class, religion, culture, and gender. Sometimes, these are willfully and meticulously constructed to condition people's lives. By doing so, voiceless individuals and the demeaned gender are forced to descend the line of power. Power struggle arises from how man uses language. Charnas makes an explicit remark that skillful use of language can sometimes reinforce stereotypes in society. Ancient men in the novel struggle to take control over women by willfully violating individual freedom through the breeding process. Men in this novel make full efforts to overcome the power struggle by asserting authority through tone and language. The counter-narrative tone of the writer plays a significant role in shaping the perception of the plot and content. She skillfully uses various male narrations to reveal the identity of a monstrous patriarchal society. When Alldera is thrown into the camper, a man gathers all his courage to sing a song that reveals the preposterousness and foolishness of the ancient old men. At times, as a means of howling the saddening and deeply wounding reality of the truth, it takes an ordinary man to use language composed with tunes addressing the evil heart of the old men. It shows how language is used as a tool to uncover the stark reality of male subjugation. Women, in general, encounter different degrees of oppression. In this novel, young fems, bereft of the courage to voice out, are doubly oppressed.

The novel records the collective experience of shame and indignity endured by the carry-fems and young fems, who are sidelined to take up menial labor. Charnas portrays the interpersonal relationship between Alldera and the hard-used labor fems. They are irrational and know no logic in life. They are portrayed as easily manipulated by the men in society. Charnas offers a vivid description of the crippled men, unable to maintain relationships with other men. From the beginning of the novel to the end, Charnas maintains the true color of women's suffering. They have always been victims of men, from which no one escapes except Alldera. Undergoing manipulation, oppression, and suffering, Alldera eventually explores the ways and mindset of men. She becomes a smart woman, capable of confronting her master, who ruthlessly exploited her true identity. No matter how much discrimination she faced on her journey, she finds ways to overcome it through her unique gifts of patience and endurance. She is the symbolic image of endurance. Born into a so-called weak community, she lifts herself from the ash heaps to the true throne of honor. The height of stupidity is shown when men place all the blame on women for their decline and failures.

At a certain point in the novel, men believe that their sole purpose in life is to oppress the fems. Even though the narration presents the plot from a radical feminist point of view, it carries a truth that seeks to bring justice.

Gender roles have taken its prominence throughout the novel. Servan acquired the derogatory reputation as bully and sly heckler in the community. He is good at maneuvering people to instigate their spirit towards violence. Eykar said of Servan "you have hard heart" (Charnas 60). On that note, he is admonished several times by Eykar. He says, "I saw how easily you maneuvered them, yes. But it was to you and Kelmz that they responded" (Charnas 58). Eykar desperately wants to know the truth beyond the border of the Holdfast. When he comes to know that there is only the Wild—the scrubland beyond Holdfast—he raises the question of what pressing need there is to reconquer such nugatory and useless territory. The men, for all these years, have gathered and prepared the fems and young men solely to reconquer land that has no ultimate worth. Eykar knows how bad life can be in Holdfast.

There is a constant threat for identity and social unrest in the place. Eykar says to Servan, "I'm better informed about the pain of Holdfast life than most men are; so you don't need to enlighten me" (Charnas 62). > The writer has made an earnest effort to divulge the social and cultural divisions that have sliced apart the unity and harmony of Holdfast society. She unravels the nuances of stratification in Holdfast culture and illustrates how, in a given culture, division cuts through the community and places men over fems and old men over young men. The people who survived the cataclysm at the beginning of the novel structured the community and their lifestyle in a way that clearly distinguishes gender, social class, and culture. Fems are forced to endure suffering in a misogynistic culture. Among the fems, Charnas highlights evidence of both strength and weakness. Alldera, the character known for endurance, shows a remarkable sign of strength while working under heinous masters and leads a group of hardworking fems. The identity of fems is dehumanized. They have lost freedom, peace, and happiness. They are taken into 'Refuge' solely for breeding purposes. Ordinary, uneducated fems are relegated to procreation, and their hard work and labor are overlooked and unrecognized within the societal framework. > They are not allowed to occupy important roles in the process of reconquering the land they once lost. Men subjugate these fems in all aspects of life, subjecting them to menial tasks and drudgery. Beyond this purpose, they have no other rewarding roles in the community. Fems are destined to be treated as animals following the post-eco catastrophe. Decadent men plan to keep them as 'pets' so they can be taken for granted. Whenever lust overcomes them, they exploit the poor fems for sexual gratification. Young men raised in the Boyhouse are exposed to illegal practices. This is how the societal framework traps them in a state of corruption. The most preposterous ideology is that the father-son bond is considered one of archnemeses, which is anomalous, atypical, and strange. What is normal and holds intrinsic value is now conditioned to be abnormal in the dystopian world. These factors contribute to the division in society.

Charnas has made a significant effort in explicating the servitude of the weak in the community. The weak may refer to fems in one instance and underprivileged men in another. Older fems undergo harrowing experiences at the hands of men. This leaves them feeling dreadful and leads them to a hopeless conclusion—that survival is possible only if they give up their resistance against men. They live in fear and are constantly kept in a state of uncertainty. Charnas, through this remarkable work, brings to light a compelling examination of characters portrayed through various concepts such as gender roles, power structures, and social stratification in a dystopian society. Moreover, this study can be juxtaposed with *Brave New World*, which reveals how the essence of a dystopian world is reflected in real-world ideologies. Eventually, this research underscores that Charnas's novel is not a sheer reflection of

speculative fiction, but a reverberating critique of the institutionalized dominance of patriarchal and social hierarchies.

## Works Cited

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