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Tim Winton's *Cloudstreet* as a Celebration of Working-Class Culture

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Abstract:

The present research paper attempts to study Tim Winton's novel entitled *Cloudstreet* as a celebration of working-class culture. The novel, covering the period of twenty years from 1943 to 1963, depicts the lives of two working-class Australian families namely the Lamb family and the Pickles family. Both the families are contrast to each other. They are precipitated by separate personal tragedies. They flee their rural livings and share a house at Number One Cloud Street in Perth suburb of West Leederville. The Lambs are hard-working people who find meaning in industry and in God's grace. The Pickleses are lazy people who believe in luck. The major characters especially Oriel Lamb, Lester Lamb, Quick Lamb, Sam Pickles and Rose Pickles are industrious people who seem to follow working-class culture. *Cloudstreet* can be read as a story of their hard work and great achievements in life. Hence, the present research paper attempts to study Tim Winton's novel *Cloudstreet* as a celebration of working-class culture.

Keywords: working-class culture, hard-working people, industrious nature.

Tim Winton, born on 4th August 1960 in Perth, is one of the most reputed Australian writers. He has to his credit ten novels, three short story collections, six children's books and four non-fictional prose works. His works have been successfully adapted for stage, radio, television and film. He has won many prestigious awards for his literary contribution as well as for his contribution towards environmental issues. He is known for his descriptions of West Australian coastlines and landscapes. He is also known for his remarkable prose style which makes extensive use of the vernacular language. He has witnessed the hardships suffered by the working-class people in Australia. He is popular for his vivid depictions of working-class Australian life. He, as a writer, has a reputation as a champion of the working-class. He even

defines himself as an author of the working-classes. Hence, in the present research paper, an attempt is made to study Winton's novel entitled *Cloudstreet* as a celebration of working-class culture.

Tim Winton's novel *Cloudstreet*, published in 1991, is a powerful exploration of the miraculous and divine in the lives of ordinary people. It is often described as a family Saga and a novel about suffering. However, it addresses numerous other issues such as tragedy, faith, doubt, religion, work, violence, nationality, community, belonging, European settlement and the treatment of Aboriginal people of Australia. It is a novel of great ambition, great beauty and huge conviction. It is considered as a "Great Australian novel." (Dixon, Tim Winton 247) It, being the most popular novel, was voted number one on the Australian Society of Authors' Top Forty Australian Books List in 2003. It was greatly received by the public and acclaimed by the critics as well. It was an instant success and the recipient of a number of prestigious awards. It won the NBC Banjo Award for Fiction, the West Australian Fiction Award, the Miles Franklin Award and Deo Gloria Award (UK).

Tim Winton's *Cloudstreet* can be considered as a celebration of working-class culture. The novel, covering the period of twenty years from 1943 to 1963, depicts the lives of two working-class Australian families namely the Lamb family and the Pickles family. It gives an account of these families' past lives and their endless adversities. It also gives an account of their present struggles and their eventual reconciliation with one another and with life itself. It follows their lives and how they come to grow, develop, love and change during their stay at Cloudstreet. The characters in the novel constantly remind the reader of the cultural wealth of the common people and the important ancestral land that make up a diverse and unique Australia. They are portrayed as a group of marginals within their society, people who do not fit in with social conventions.

Tim Winton's *Cloudstreet* presents the values and attitudes of Australian life. It depicts the struggle of the characters to adapt to the urban environment. The novel is a story of twenty years of shouting and fighting of the two families which eventually form a bond and a sense of belonging for everyone. It, in conclusion, suggests that the life of cycle will continue forever and that some questions will never be answered. In the foregoing part of this research paper Tim Winton's *Cloudstreet* will be studied as a celebration of working-class culture. It also aims to study how Winton directs these values at the Australian society in order to provide a sense of understanding to the people of their culture. Tim Winton, in an interview with Michael McGirr, summarises the attitudes of both the families to life and fate, "The Pickleses believe in luck. They're essentially passive and life just *happens* to them, whereas the Lambs are much

more active. They believe in hard work and right living, in making their own luck.” (Michael McGirr 97)

Tim Winton’s *Cloudstreet* is a story of strikingly dissimilar families: The Lamb family and the Pickles family. Both the families are precipitated by separate personal tragedies. They flee their rural livings and share a house at Number One Cloud Street in Perth suburb of West Leederville for twenty years. They are contrast to each other. The Lambs are hard-working people who find meaning in industry and in God's grace. The Pickleses are lazy people who believe in luck. The Lambs and the Pickleses speak the language of their heart and soul. They comment and ponder on life in the most ordinary way. They are representatives of Australia’s authentic working-class culture.

The Lamb family has moved to Cloudstreet from their coastal home in Margaret river. It consists of Lester and Oriel Lamb and their six children. Lester and Oriel Lamb have three sons namely Mason as known as Quick, Samson as known as Fish and Lon. They have three daughters namely Hattie, Elaine and Red. The tragedy in the lives of the Lambs occur in the form of near drowning of Fish Lamb who remains in retarded state for the rest of his life. The Lambs are God-fearing people. They wait all through their life on the God of Miracles who appears to have forsaken them. They struggle a lot in life to regain their belief in God.

The Lambs are industrious people. They are hard-working. They believe in work, family and the nation. They plan and open a shop on their side of the house. They fill the shelves with jars and jugs. They load the crates with fruits and vegetables. The sign along their counter says — “LAMBS SMALLGOODS, quality nice - best price.” (55) The Lambs are happy as they become successful shopkeepers. They work relentlessly throughout the day, in the evenings too. All the Lamb girls too work in the shop.

The Lambs achieve great success in life with their hard work. Though they remain as tenants at Cloudstreet, they become successful shopkeepers and also expert makers and sellers of the best ice cream in Perth. The Lambs’ place wins all the trade in Cloudstreet. It, in due course of time, becomes a vibrant place. The narrator says, “The house was full of comings and goings. Repairs were planned, though nothing ever eventuated, and just the idea gave the place a fresh look. Out the front, the place looked like a dancehall parking lot. There was a Chev truck, the X-ray Rugby, an Oxford, an old Humber, a Harley and sidecar and Lon’s new FJ Holden that would never be paid for.” (395) Thus, the Lambs achieve a lot of things with their hard efforts. Lester Lamb says to his wife Oriel:

We have a big place to live in. We’re three years ahead with the rent, the kids have food and clothes, they go to school and have jobs, and now one has a

husband - she's a credit to us, that girl - and there's the shop. People say: There goes Mrs Lamb who lives in a tent, she runs the best shop this side of the river. Gawd, the trams even stop for you. People come to you for advice like you're Daisy-flemin-Bates. Yor're famous! Course yer a winner. (234)

Thus, The Lambs are like the Coupars, the Bells and the Pustlings in Winton's novel *Shadows*. They are the characters who are part of the history of the place and a commanding environment.

Oriel Lamb, the woman with a strong personality, can be seen as the true representative of working-class culture. She is an influential presence in the neighbourhood. She is very stiff and conservative when it comes to those around her, including her own family and herself. She lives in a tent in the backyard and she manages the household as well as a shop. She keeps herself busy in works such as darning, raking, caking and baking at all hours. In her early childhood too, she had kept herself busy in raising the children of her father from a second marriage. Oriel Lamb expects perfect work from all the family members. She gives instructions to all on how to finish the work. When she supervises the digging up of their half of the backyard, the narrator says, "It was a sight to see all the Lambs down there on their knees in the black dirt planting seedlings of onion and cabbage and the withered, shoothairy fists of old potatoes." (49) Oriel Lamb, the other time, watches carefully Lon packing crates up the truck. She sternly instructs him, "We do things a certain way in this family, Lon. It's called the proper way. When we say we'll do something we stand by it. Pull it down and pack it properly." (406) Oriel Lamb is a strong-minded woman and she does not even mind beating her twenty-two-year-old son Lon in front of his wife and daughter for not listening to her and for using fowl words.

Oriel Lamb becomes a successful entrepreneur. She reacts very strongly to rival Mrs Clay's initiative to compete with her. Oriel and Mrs Clay compete with each other in their business using arguments about their respective husband's involvement in the war and their loyalty to the nation. Oriel Lamb realises that Mrs Clay had to be wiped out in the matter of business. She trades and fights her business rival by setting up a sign that reads: "WE'RE LOCAL, WE'RE HONEST, WE'RE HERE." (58) She plans and wipes out her business rival with vanilla ice cream. Mrs. Clay and her husband G. M. Clay have to close down their shop and the Lambs enjoy a sense of victory.

Oriel Lamb, however, is a sympathetic woman. She offers a room and job to Mrs Clay during the difficult time. She also offers a job and shelter to the poor lady Beryl Lee. Thus, Oriel Lamb is a true representative of working-class culture. She considers her whole life as if it is a war. She, once looking at her hands, thinks that they are farmer's hands. Quick Lamb

tells his wife Rose the other time about his mother. He says, “I thought she only cared about work. Mum’s principles are work, work and work.” (401)

Lester Lamb, Oriel’s husband, exhibits the traits of working-class culture. He was a farmer initially. He used to tie rags and bottle caps in the almond tree to keep the birds away. He becomes a policeman because the farm was not a profitable business. He later quits the police force because his wife Oriel forces him to do so. After moving to Cloudstreet, he comes up with the idea of opening a shop. He notices that there is no corner shop on this side of the railway track. He convinces Oriel to use the front room out there for the shop. He also notices that the Pickleses are lazy and they will never think of opening a shop. He gets completely engrossed in the shop. He keeps bringing parcels of fish and chips and vegetables. He comes out with the idea of “Lester Lamb’s Amazing Vanilla Double Cream” ice cream. He knows that he would clean up their business rival the Clays with his own ice cream recipe. Lester also brings himself a hawker’s cart and harnesses to go into the delivery side of the business. The narrator says:

He (Lester) saw himself clopping through the suburbs ringing his bell, swinging his scales, rattling his blackboards, the cart laden with fruit and vegetables and his songs and jokes drawing women and children into the streets. It wasn't the commerce of it that got his pea rattling (though he sold the idea that way to Oriel), it was the performance side of things; the singing and shouting, the jokes, stories, the eyes of the crowd on him. (132)

Thus, Lester Lamb becomes a successful entrepreneur with his working-class nature.

Quick Lamb, Oriel and Lester’s son, is also a representative of working-class culture. He appears to be workaholic since his early childhood. He once builds a fowlhouse from broken tea-chests and an old forty-four-gallon drum. He gets his first job of shooting kangaroos at the Wentworth family. He, then, works as a driver for a long time. He canes himself with work. He thinks that he is trying to cope up with the life but, in reality, he is miserable, lost, drifting, tired and homesick. He keeps himself busy in driving. One day, he goes through a terrible driving accident. He was nearly killed in the truck accident.

Quick Lamb, after surviving the truck accident, works on the fishing boat of his cousins Earl and May. His hands bled and his arms ached with hard work. He once lies fainted on the boat for a day. He was found to Earl and May the next day. He was taken to Perth for treatment. Quick Lamb slowly realises that what actually happened to him was due to hard work. Quick Lamb had also worked in the wheatbelt for some time. He, then, joins the police force. After his marriage to Rose Pickles, he works hard in order to pay for their new house in the suburbs.

Quick Lamb and Rose worked and saved so hard that they barely spent any time together. They were hungry for each other. They saved their hopes as well as their money. Quick, after his transfer to Traffic, likes the work and he does his duty with the same spirit of working-class culture.

Thus, the Lambs are highly successful in their life because of their working-class culture. Sam Pickles notices the hard-working nature of the Lambs. He says:

You'd think they were carrying the nation their backs with all that scrubbing and sweeping, tacking up shelves and blackboards, arguing over the situation of jars, tubs, scales and till. Stinking dull work, the labour of sheilas at best, with all that smile and how do you do, Sir, but you had to admire them for it. They were just scrub farmers green to town, a mob of gangly, puppet-limbed yokels but they moved in like they'd designed the house themselves. Making luck, the hardest donkey yacker there is. With that little woman pushing and harassing and haranguing. They'd never go hungry, that lot, but neither would they have it high on the hog. (75)

The Pickles family consists of Sam and Dolly Pickles and their children namely Rose, Ted and Chub. The Pickleses come from Geraldton. They had gone through many hardships. In one year or so they had lost the house. Sam Pickles had been through two jobs and he had gambled away all the savings. He had also lost the four fingers of his left hand in a fishing accident. The Pickleses had to live in the pub of Joel, Sam's cousin. Joel's sudden death proves to be a timely blessing for the Pickleses. The huge house at Number One Cloud Street is willed to Sam Pickles by Joel. The Pickleses move to Cloud Street. They are forced to rent out half of the house to the Lambs in order to survive financially. They are conventionally shiftless people who leave life to take care of itself. They are essentially passive. They are gambling people who prefer to deal with the mysteries of Lady Luck and her henchmen. The local people feel that the Pickleses are not made of the same stuff as their tenants. They didn't have stickability to any one thing in life. It can be said that Dolly Pickles, a damn good-looking woman, is a worthless wife and mother. Ted and Chub are lazy and careless sons. However, Sam Pickles and the eldest daughter Rose Pickles can be considered as the true representatives of working-class culture.

Sam Pickles, the father figure, is the working-class man and strong republican. He did badly at school. He was a butcher's apprentice for four years. He was a sort of utility man there. His luck had waxed and waned since he left his mother. He is a compulsive gambler who has lost so badly and consistently. In a single bad year, he had gambled away everything he had

owned. He had been a foreman in the wheatbelt for some time. While Sam works on the Guano Islands off the coast, his wife Dolly Pickles works in the bar and spends afternoon with an American Catalina Pilot in Room 36 of Eurythmic Hotel.

Sam Pickles, then, gets a job at the Mint. He works to earn his pay packet but he loses money on horse racing on every weekends. He is a born gambler who seems to have accepted his bad luck. He is not that much bothered about life. He didn't mind the work at the mint because it was better for his asthma than the wheat dust on the mainland wharf where he had worked as a foreman. His clothes and his skin smell of metals and kerosene. Sam Pickles is the sentimental favourite of the workers at the mint. He is a cheerful little man, always with a wheezy laugh and a fag to give. He, though a loser, is loved by all the people on the race track too. The narrator says:

Sam didn't mind the Mint work so much. It cheered him up to be around the money and he wouldn't pretend it was otherwise. The whole place filled with the stink of melting and burning, the thump of the presses and the whang of the steel gates. He oiled the machines and wiped them down with cotton waste. He stood on the belt line spotting for duds and took the trollies back and forth. (156)

Rose Pickles, the eldest daughter in the Pickles family, is a slender brown girl with dark straight hair, cut hard across her forehead. Among the Pickleses kids, she only adapts a working-class culture. Rose Pickles has worked relentlessly for her family since her childhood. She is shouldered with the responsibilities at an early age. She learns to cook early because her mother is always too drunk and her father is always late home. She knows well that her brothers would go hungry without her and maybe they would even starve. She is clever enough to steal a bit of her father's pay each week. She bought groceries from next door shop and small household things in Subiaco. She learns to wash the laundry and to clean the house. Rose loves school. She wants to be a clever woman, to know poetry and mathematics. She is eager to go to Africa and discover something. However, she has to enter the workforce for the sake of her family.

Rose Pickles joins the workforce and she is thrust into the world of Perth city. She starts her job as a switchboard operator. She is delighted to be selected for the post. She feels really capable for the first time in her life. She enjoys working on the switch at the Bairds for years. She has fun on the swich. She also enjoys a plenty of mischief while working there. She has a company of good friends and she likes to talk at the tea breaks. After some years she thinks of changing the job due to boredom. However, she is forced to work due to the heavy Depression

years. Her father would like to convince her saying, "You've got a good job, now be grateful and keep it." (283) Her mother too expects that Rose should keep working. She feels that Rose's job will help the family to come out of their financial difficulties.

Rose Pickles, during her short affair with Toby Raven, develops an idyllic vision of life. She needs to escape from her working-class background. She reconciles with love and is cured from the influence of Toby Raven and his artificial world as soon as she gets attracted towards Quick Lamb. She is eager to transform herself and materialize into a responsible woman. She marries Quick Lamb and both of them work hard in order to fulfil their dreams. Rose suffers from anorexia. She faces the worst moment in her life. She has a miscarriage. However, after the two months, she continues her work as the switchboard operator. She gets thinner and thinner all the time, looking dark eyed and ghostly when she gets home after work. She quits her work and stays at home because she is too weak and spiritless to get through the day's work anymore. Still, she keeps herself busy at home. The narrator says, "All day she sat inside making and remaking the bed, arranging the cups in the kitchenette so their handles pointed exactly the same way. She boiled and reboiled the cutlery, and on all fours she searched for floor dirt." (349) Thus, Rose Pickles and her father Sam Pickles can be seen as true representatives of working-class culture.

In conclusion, it can be said that Tim Winton's *Cloudstreet* is a celebration of working-class culture in the true sense of the word. The major characters especially Oriel Lamb, Lester Lamb, Quick Lamb, Sam Pickles and Rose Pickles are industrious people who seem to follow work culture throughout their lives. *Cloudstreet* can be read as a story of their hard work and great achievements in life. The Lambs are hard-working people who find meaning in industry and in God's grace. The Lambs, particularly Oriel Lamb, Lester Lamb and Quick Lamb, work hard and become successful shopkeepers. They achieve great success in their business and even wipe out the Clays, their business rival, very skilfully. They appear to have devoted their life towards work. Sam Pickles and his daughter Rose Pickles seem to have understood the true meaning of life and keep working for the sake of their family. Thus, Tim Winton's novel *Cloudstreet* depicts the authentic Australian working-class culture.

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