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English 215

Tropic of Orange and Critical Theory

Growing up we are exposed to different kinds of languages, cultures, and ideologies. In this day and age people can travel more or turn to technology like the internet that gives the public faster and more accessible way to encounter those things. Language, culture, and ideology have influence over what we want to create, how we interpret things around us, and as consumers respond to oral, visual, and written works that are presented to us. To better understand how those things play a role in how we view the world I will use the text *Tropic of Orange* as an example. I’ll be using the discipline of Critical Theory to analyze the work in an attempt to examine viewpoints on race, class, and gender produced in a culture. Critical theory has four branches of theory that defines it: Marxist, psychoanalytic, gender studies, race and ethnicity studies. In *Tropic of Orange* culture’s material aspects are heavily scattered throughout the novel and the theories will explore how those aspects are significant in how we process things around us.

In Yamashita’s *Tropic of Orange* the novel follows a series of events that occur during a week following the perspectives of multiple characters who come from different ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds. The main plot of the story is the politics that surrounds the shipment of orange that are laced with concentrated dose of drugs. The consequence of the drugged orange is that it leads to a series of cases involving overdose, including a larger case where a driver dies from overdose causing a huge traffic accident.

The language, culture, and social circumstances affects how each of the characters perceive the series of events that are unfolding right before their eyes and the visual, oral, and written texts that is churned out by the culture that they live in. The scene involving Emi and Gabriel conversing at a sushi restaurant best illustrate this. At one point of the conversation, Emi talks about her job and how it’s all about timing and editing certain parts of the broadcast to make enough room for the commercials. Emi argues that it’s all about money, selling things, and what is the most effective way to churn it out. Meaning good honest people like Gabriel who want to report important issues that needs to be addressed are pushed aside in that it doesn’t accumulate money. The conversation eventually switches from the economic aspects of the culture they live in to the social aspects. Gabriel and Emi create elaborate stories about the people in the restaurant, the game is brought up by Emi to illustrate her point on how society’s concept of multicultural diversity is “bull shit.” Many different kinds of cultures are presented to the public by means of products, most people approach different cultures to experience them for what they are isn’t as nearly important as the seemingly exotic commodities it possesses that can serve as a way to accumulate money. Emi is well aware of how the American culture she lives in functions and occasionally makes a jab at it, she only goes along with the capitalist society she lives in since it’s the only way she can keep her position.

The capitalist society described by the characters can be analyzed and explained through the lens of Marxist theory. In an attempt to explain how and why societies move from one economic system to another is based on how society produce material goods (McComiskey, 237). For instance the U.S. like some countries moving from agriculture to industrial production. Foucault who studies under Marxist theory developed his own theories arguing that human nature is a construct created through discourses of power within culture (McComisky, 241). Capitalism’s ability to thrive is based on continual improvement and effectiveness in the various modes of production. The efficacy of transforming resources found in nature into commodities that can be sold to the public depended on the use of labor power (Parthasarathy, 110). Throughout the novel oranges comes up a lot, other than being plot trinket in causing the main conflict in the story it represents how products are allowed to enter the border such as the shipment of oranges while people were not unless they provide labor as a means of production. One of the characters, Arcangel notes this and comments on this in his speech during a wrestling match in that people watching the match are not regarded as human beings but means of labor. The land that they live on and the things they make do not belong to them but are the property of the economic system.

There is the emergence of international division of labor as capitalist societies expand. Many countries were exchanging primary goods for manufactured goods, in turn begin to develop their own manufacturing centers (Parthasarathy, 112). As a result countries try to lower costs by placing high labor intensive production factories in areas that will supply cheap labor which are located in third world countries. The capitalist system of the world is divided into three regions. The more powerful and most developed portion of the system is situated in countries within Western Europe, North America, and Japan (Robinson, 129). The second part are countries that have been colonized in the past which includes Latin America, Africa, Asia, the Middle East, and Eastern Europe (Robinson, 129). The third are semi-periphery, regions that are moving up or down the hierarchy of the core system (Robinson, 129). Companies would switch from unskilled workers to skilled workers owing to the development and use of sophisticated technology to increase production (Parthasarathy, 113). As technology advances there is less need for low wage workers as means of labor is being performed by automated machines. Increasing productivity due to better technology is an often preferred method than dealing with the costs of using unskilled workers.

Psychoanalytic theory is another branch of critical theory that focuses on how much free agency an individual possess. In psychoanalytic theory there is a belief that people create culture and societies that reflect the thinking patterns, desires, and drives (McComisky, 246). An example of this is Manzanar who left his career as a surgeon which is considered a respectable position by society and his ethnic group to pursue something that is considered less respectable. The Japanese American community consider his decision a blemish on their reputation as a “Model Minority” and attempted to move him away from the public eye to no avail. Manzanar spends most of his time living under the freeway pass conducting his own music through the various sounds produced by the traffic that only he and several people can hear. Manzanar’s conduction of music serves as an example illustrates psychoanalytic theory of how the inner workings of the mind is correlated to the value in art and language as a coded systems that reveal motivations, thinking pattern, or structural beliefs of an artist (McComisky, 246).

When thinking about feminist and gender theory, one may think it is the study of issues faced by males and females. In fact the studies are focused on cultural context, how people feel about the governing body of society. Individuals usually fall in a specific role with expectations constructed within culture that promote practices that limit human choices and freedom (McComisky, 247). Expectations created in culture influence people’s way of thinking and form the base for how they make sense of their surroundings, such expectations may not mesh well with reality and how things can become unpredictable. In the case with Gabriel who view situations with a Romantic sensibility. Gabriel thought he can get Rafaela to love him by offering her employment and a place to stay. The reality is Rafaela accepted the offer out of practicality, she views and treats their relationship on a professional level as an employer and employee. The same can be said about his dream home that was built as a way to connect to his Mexican heritage which he has no life experience of being brought up as a native. It is only after returning to the house after such a long time and encountering a beaten Rafaela that he comes to realize his idea of the place and thoughts about Rafaela’s situation are far from reality.

Race and ethnicity theory focuses on how race, ethnic background, and a person’s nationhood are constructed and embedded in culture as a way to distribute power. The goal is to achieve equal distribution of goods and services, along with freedom among all people regardless of background (McComisky, 257). Oral, visual, and written text can be used by the dominant class to oppress and retain power or used by subalterns as a form of resistance (McComisky, 257). Buzzworm acts as an advocate for the homeless and works with Gabriel to give the homeless a voice and have their issues addressed to the public. One instance that illustrates the dominant class exercising power for their own goals is when Buzzworm is reflecting on the house he received from his late grandmother. Bureaucrats were having a freeway built where his grandmother was living to better accommodate commuters and promised that she won’t be affected by it. It result in the place being occupied by drug dealers, prostitutes, and the homeless after so much clearing and construction has prevented people from being able to pass and come to his grandmother’s dress shop. Eventually, Buzzworm finds a way to let the homeless be known to the public through live TV coverage of the traffic accident running their own show.

*Tropic of Orange* stresses the importance of seeing people as humans over being means of production. The novel is able to illustrate the complexity of the world through the multi-point of view of its many characters. With the characters coming from various cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds it shows the different sides and faces of the world they live in. No branch of study under Critical Theory is more superior to the other in explaining how and why people perceive the world the way they do. Each are developed to provide various methods to analyze the subject.

Work Cited

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