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Pro-Life and Pro-Choice Contentions in Joyce Carol Oates's: A Book of American Martyrs

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Abstract: This thesis probes into the issue on pro-life and pro-choice contentions in Joyce Carol Oates's: A Book of American Martyrs. Karl Marx explains how capitalists maneuver the deferred redemption intrinsic of religion *per se* to exploit and oppress workers and re-enforce capitalism proper. In the novel, the transformation of Luther and Gus provides a convincing account for Luther's frenzy and Gus's irreligion. This thesis discusses argues that the workers are unconsciously subjected to the governance of the dominant group via the conceptualization of religious ideology and religious culture industry. It should be condemned to impose one's belief on the others, or even to commit murder ruthlessly in the name of God.

Keywords: Murder; Religion; Society

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1. Introduction

The debate on pro-life and pro-choice in the United States has been a heated controversy all the time. In 1994, a pastor shot an abortion surgeon and his bodyguard. It is not a unique instance. In 2009, an extremist shot an abortion surgeon in the church in Texas and he was sentenced to life imprisonment. Based on the actual fact, Joyce Carol Oates (1938-) wrote A Book of American Martyrs to reconsider the dispute and the extreme behavior^{(1)[1-2]}. Gus Voorhees is a pioneer in the advancement of women's reproductive rights and a controversial abortion provider in the American Midwest. One morning as he arrived at his clinic with the driver, Barron, he was ambushed by a hardline Christian, Luther Dunphy, and shot dead but Luther's sentence has been stayed for years. The tragedy is triggered by the polarized attitudes towards abortion and the reproductive dispute.

Since the founding of the republic, the President has to be sworn in with hand on the Bible as the Puritan traditions have deeply rooted in the United States. Ministers had great political influence, and civil authorities exercised a large measure of control over church affairs. After the 17th century the Puritans as

(1) Dr. George R. Tiller, an abortion protester in Kansas, was shot to death in a crime that renewed debate over the use of violence in the battle. President Barack Hussein Obama appealed to each side to respect one another's basic decency but it was proved to have little effects. Responding to a question about whether her work is "often a conscious, if indirect, reaction to current political and social situations," Oates says that she is "an American writer keenly attuned to the world she lives" (Cologne-Brookes 550). Oates prefers to absorb current events in her novels. She has explored the Chappaquiddick's incident involving Ted Kennedy (*Black Water*, 1992) and the JonBenet Ramsay murder case (*My Sister, My Love*, 2008). She has woven the Niagara Falls Love Canal environmental scandal into the framework of *The Falls* (2004) and taken inspiration from sordid events in her own family's past for the beginning of *The Gravedigger's Daughter* (2007). Most of her novels seem to be *roman à clef* that is a novel about real life, overlaid with a façade of fiction and the "key" is the relationship between the nonfiction and the fiction.

a political entity gradually phasing out, but Puritan attitudes and ethics continued to exert an influence on American society economically and politically. German sociologist Max Weber affirmed and acclaimed these Protestant qualities with the rise of capitalism⁽²⁾ [3]. For Ian Watt, Weber's *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* can be rendered: "... as a specific historical thesis, claiming a correlation between Calvinism and entrepreneurial attitudes; as a causal analysis of the influence of Puritanism upon capitalistic activity; as an interpretation of the origins of key components of modern Western society as a whole."⁽²⁰⁾

Puritanism is not only a religious belief, but a philosophy, a combination of life styles with living values. Many of American social and culture values can find their origin in Puritanism. American Puritans linked material wealth with God's favor as they believed that hard work was the way to please God and their salvation could be achieved through self-discipline, self-improvement and diligence.

As a writer who is often considered to be a chronicler of the American middle class, there can be no doubt that Oates's novels draw upon not only variety of true crime stories but also generally describe realistic situations and emotions that speak to the whole world. "The serious writer, after all, bears witness. The serious writer restructures "reality" in the service of his or her art, ..." (Oates 1981: 35) [2]. She is good at penetrating deeply into the "subjectivity" of human kind to expose the social reality by using techniques of psychological realism like stream of consciousness, interior monologue, symbolism, as well as association and memory⁽³⁾ [4]. Oates does not moralize, and this is not a book that will comfort those who are stubborn and strong in their beliefs. At a time when we as a society feel so ideologically distant and yet are told that we have more in common than all that divides us, this novel rings true without being weighed down by sentimentality.

2. The Blame on "Killers" in the Name of God

2.1 Religion: Alienation

In letters to Gus Voorhees in *A Book of American Martyrs*, women and girls are "instructed by elders to consider abortion as a terrible sin-the "slaughter of the innocents"⁽⁴⁾ [5]." To be sure, religious doctrine is embedded in American cultural values, including equality and no killing. As David Smolin [6] has put it right: "It is the abortion liberty that is the aberration in relationship to our society's fundamental values and norms." (674).

Karl Marx has proposed the essence of religion and characterized it as the paradigmatic form of the alienated consciousness through the comparison of proletarians' condition and the votaries⁽⁵⁾[7]. Alienation stresses the mystification that prevents an adherent from seeing both the full extent of his misery and the possibilities of becoming free of that misery. Through religion, pro-lifers pin hope on God to save their life while they are trapped in the ideology about abortion and make them buried in misery. The advocated argument of supporting the illegality of abortion for pro-lifers is mainly about Christianity creeds. Therefore, the essence of religion and the connection between it and power control are the central point [8].

(2) Max Weber first observes a correlation between Protestantism and business, and declares his intent to explore religion as a potential cause of the modern economic conditions. He argues that the modern spirit of capitalism sees profits as an end in itself, and pursuing profits as virtuous. "Waste of time is thus the first and in principle the deadliest of sins" (104). "The emphasis on the ascetic importance of a fixed calling provided an ethical justification of the modern specialized division of labor" (109). He argues that Protestantism was one contributing factor and he also acknowledges that capitalism itself had an impact on the development of religious idea.

(3) Joyce Carol Oates has cultivated a self-described "psychological realism" that seeks to depict a greater realm of truth beyond the world of facts. She depicts the truth of emotion and felt experience, "states of mind which are real enough – emotions, moods, shifting obsessions, beliefs" (Oates 1994:307). Cf. in "Afterward: Reflections on the Grotesque".

(4) Joyce Carol Oates, *A Book of American Martyrs*. Nashville: HarperCollins, 2017, 188. All subsequent citations from this work will refer to this edition and be included within parentheses in the text.

(5) Karl Marx posited a thinly sketched theory of ideology and religion as alienated and false consciousness in *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844* that was first published in 1970.

Not only living in the natural environment, man receives the influence of the society constituted by states and his species. It is the feeling that causes man to make religion but the feeling generates from the distress in reality. The religious believers perceive their abnormal world consciousness right as they are products of the distorted world of which religion is merely a reflection. Feuerbach categorizes the religious estrangement into the spiritual field but Marx takes it into the labor estrangement. Although religion is not produced the same way as the production, it is an appendage produced by estrangement to guarantee that producing activities of private property may keep going normally. The original intentions of Christianity that comforts believers' soul and helps man get rid of misery are highly praised but the unhappiness still remains in reality. The secular matters keep unsolved. Only when a man prays could he feel the hope and the illusion of pleasure. Man creates God for relief, comfort and promising future but he still keeps men suffering a lot. What man creates is exactly the contribution that makes man agony. Estrangement happens if the religion that man creates is against men and violates the purpose of the creation.

Religion, according to the Marxist critique, thus contributes to social therapy a positive benefit: a model by which man can recognize in clear outline the lineaments of his distress. But beyond this, it leads to an exacerbation of his dilemma by confusing him about both the seriousness of his problem and the genuine possibilities for real solutions. It is an objectively social and historical phenomenon that its emergence, development and distinction linked with the condition of material production, scientific culture and social system. The worker becomes all the poorer the more wealth he produces, the more his production increases in power and size because the being of the worker becomes an even-cheaper commodity. Surprisingly, the production becomes an estranged existence that is independent from the worker. Only through working hard, even worn out with irregular interruptions could labor become the object. The more energy and efforts the worker spends in the labor, the power of alienation that he creates is stronger and the poorer he is. Similarly, the more believers devote to religion, the less they hold and ultimately the value of human is depreciated.

This explains the contrasting characterization of Luther Dunphy and Augustus Voorhees. Luther from the lower class suffers a lot out of capitalists' exploitation and the "unfortunate" life contributes to alcohol addiction and promiscuity. The violation of Christian creeds does not prevent him from being the soldier of God because he needs Christianity for salvation and hope. His radicality of Christianity exactly proves how terrible the living condition is and how much he is exploited. Both capitalism and religion have extremely deceptive characteristics, encouraging workers and believers to willingly step into the artificial trap⁽⁶⁾.

As religion was formed out of social and historical background, the principle of its operation is similar to capitalist system. Capitalism, based on private ownership, keeps going because workers are forced to sell their labor to survive. Lacking of free time, healthy body and sufficient salary, they struggle in bad living condition and low mood, pinning hope on religion to escape from the secular distress. Ironically, capitalism goes hand in hand with religious belief. Religion deprives believers of judgment ability and the way to recognizing the truth while capitalism deprives the value of labor and makes human an object. However, capital controls not only the workers but also the capitalists sometimes. People get hurt in capitalism, so resorting to religion seems to be a means of soul comfort.

The non-compulsory machines that make civil society consensus of the dominance echoes with Louis Althusser's Ideological State Apparatuses. Beneath the ruling ideology, it is the ideology of the ruling class and by means of educational apparatus in capitalist social formations. "All Ideological State Apparatuses,

(6) Luther attacks Dr. Voorhees as if the abortion-providers died, he would get rid of his dilemma. But he does not realize that the true sinner is not the abortion-provider but his capitalist class. Luther is disappointed towards the living condition but he cannot find a solution, only pinning hope on religion. That's why he claims to be the soldier of God and keep bearing the terrible social and family life which is caused by capitalists to some degree.

whatever they are, contribute to the same result: the reproduction of the relations of production, example of capitalist relations of exploitation” (Althusser 23) ^[9]. This is a very attenuated and concealed, even symbolic approach to discipline the subordinate ones led by the ruling class.

3. Conclusion

Joyce Carol Oates looks at either side of the abortion debate by portraying characters and motives of antiabortionists and fundamentalists. The author depicts a picture of the American society on the dawn of Trump’s America: belief and spirituality on both sides, pro-choice and the right to life and of personal traumata, and the all-America trauma, 9-11. This is a portrait of society and a story of suspense with a glimpse of hope in the end. Oates’s mastery perfectly upholds the subject of power-the give and take of power, and even the gain and loss of power. As the chapter ended with the death of Luther, Oates measured her character’s puny influence in his world of comforts against the evitable abyss.

The unconscious consensus and willingness of the religious reign is a kind of cultural hegemony that Antonio Gramsci puts forwards. “The party must hold together in a dialectical unity the two levels ‘of force and of consent, authority and hegemony, violence and civilization, of agitation and of propaganda, of tactics and of strategy’” (315) ^[10]. Compared with force and legislation, art, literature and other non-compulsory means serve the purpose of making consensus for non-hegemonic groups or classes (Gramsci calls “subordinate”, “subaltern”). The power of cultural hegemony lies in its invisibility. Unlike a soldier with a gun or a political system backed up by a written constitution, culture resides within the subaltern ones. The intellectuals play the role of a media for connecting civil society and political society. For example, the churchmen as organic intellectual “held a monopoly of a number of important services: religious ideology, that is the philosophy and science of the age, together with schools, education, morality, justice, charity, good works, etc.” (137) ^[10]. Reverend Dennis, the pastor in *A Book of American Martyrs*, persuaded Luther to do African mission in the name of a savior, recommended Luther to go to the Toledo School of Ministry with education and school reconstruction and disciplined Luther in avoiding something that hurt the physical body (79, 82). Although Luther has a great difficulty in covering the expenditure in the ministry school and complains about the ascetic life, he demonstrates the expectation of being a pastor.

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Although abortion is considered as a betrayal of Christianity, the fact that only Christians have morality is nothing but a wrong hypothesis. Christians attempt to save Africans in the name of children of God but abandon them in war (79). The ministry school charges a lot from the poor followers in the lower class (82). Friedrich Nietzsche provides a stunning story about man’s monstrous moral past, which tells the history in the hands of civilization and Christian moralization; but also hints the demise of a Christian-moral culture. “The noble, powerful, high-stationed and high-minded, who felt and established themselves and their actions as good, that is, of the first rank, in contradistinction to all the low, low-minded, common and plebeian.” (Nietzsche 26) ^[11]. The “slaves” in inferior status resent the “master” by denying them and claiming the slave morality “good” in the name of Jesus. Slave morality in essence is utilitarian morality as it generates in a hostile external world. The morality culture in Christianity is based on the resentment, and “good,” on the noble’s self-affirmation. The Christian ones, guarding anti-abortion, are wrapped in “good” and morality.

A Book of American Martyrs is not a critique of religion but conveys respect and care, especially the reconciliation between Dawn and Naomi. The reconciliation, derived from the Bible, has the religious connotation. For salvation and propitiation, man makes efforts to end the estrangement from God and God makes the covenant with man⁽⁷⁾[12]. As long as Naomi cares about Dawn sincerely by urging and providing her to go to see the doctor and Dawn does not hold the resent inherited from their paternal generation against Naomi, they reconcile as a covenant on the base of love, respect and freedom. Besides, Dawn's family members ultimately come together for burying the dead fetuses and Naomi's family members hold a memorial ceremony for the father, which launch a new journey among family relationship. In a time of echo chambers and bitter divisions, this martyrology puts forward a powerful dream of reconciliation, ending the alienation and inexplicable hostility. Oates provides a possibility and pins a hope between pro-lifers and pro-choice proponents in different ideologies in American society.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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(7) The covenants of Noah, Abraham, Moses and David in Old Testament respectively represent the satisfying sacrament of men for God's redemption and the covenant in New Testament is completed by the blood of Jesus who substitutes for men. The emphases on covenant in the Bible builds a committed God who forgives men for many times unconditionally and renews the relationship between God and man. Now that God is willing to reconcile with man, starting a new relationship with man by means of covenant, the religious pro-lifers who believe in the absolutely correct existence are supposed to follow God's order, God's example to reconcile with the opponents. See in Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus and Samuel.