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Our Common Humanity

Literature addresses, through certain narratives and dictions, aspects about the world the reader may know of but could never fully articulate. We are able to relate to characters and situations or gain new outlooks through real or fictionalized lives that contrast their own. Certain authors convey truths about humanity, whether they are universal themes of the human condition or setting and identity based truths. Within the past few months, I have covered literary works that taught me about cultures I am unlike, while simultaneously highlighting what it is that makes all humans alike. Throughout this essay, I will be reflecting on the texts I have read in terms of my own modern experience with these common traits of humanity.

Initially, my literary journey felt as if I was an outsider; I was very aware of my distance from the stories authors were conveying. Conceptions of race, culture, and spirituality are globally individual and societies tend to disregard what is obvious: we are all more alike than we are different. We are all perceiving life in our own individual ways and although that can be seen as a distancing factor, I believe that our innate desires make relatable to each other. This is why when I read the words of someone geographically far away or 40 years my elder, I can find myself reflecting on what their words mean in connection to my life. My understanding for the importance of literature grew through the themes I critically compared throughout the novels. As expected, the diverse set of authors offered a diverse set of characters and plots but as I progressed in the literary journey, the following qualities of humanity stood out to me. Global literature carries familiar themes which, perhaps inadvertently, recall lessons or emotions I've gone through in my life. Despite the distance I may feel from characters in these books, fictional or not, I can still see certain qualities and desires within myself or those who are close to me. I

will progress through examples within literature that show six complex aspects of the human condition: Struggling with societal standards, facing injustice, innate self-interest, the desire for fulfillment, the inevitable encounter with suffering, and love.

Societal standards – beauty, marriage, the American Dream

Over time, societal constructs have heavily influenced the way people act and what they value. It can be particular to every person's subjective experience, but more than likely, the way we view ourselves is dependent on societal preferences. Expectations regarding beauty, marriage, and the ideal life based on the American Dream are detrimental to one's feeling of self-worth if they does not fit the idealistic mold. If one does fit the societal standards, then it is perpetually upheld by the glorification of those who contribute.

A clear example of the influence societal standards can have on the way people operate can be found in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*. The standards of beauty are so ingrained into the minds of Americans, regardless of race, that we cannot see the way we uphold twisted beauty standards that devalue the beauty of the collective. Morrison used Pecola's mom as a symbol for the women who does not recognize the damage it does to adhere to these standards. Pecola's mother reinforces the ideas of white superiority, pale skin and light eyes, that is already solidified in the children through the media. She cared more for the white people she worked around than her own child. The social conditioning of believing that white is somehow more idealistically beautiful is a direct effect of institutional racism.

The sentiment behind preconceived notions of what "beautiful" means shapes the progression of the young girls in the story. Not only did the children compare themselves to children with the blue eyes that they envied, they also could not understand love in its entirety

because society limited the love they could receive from strangers. Even the smallest acts of kindness, like treating a customer well, were restricted from Pecola because of her skin color. After reading her literary criticism, “Playing in the Dark,” it is clear why Morrison chose to point out what is restricted from African Americans because of systematic and individualistic racism. She recognizes the way traditional narratives show universal themes through the lens of white people. Literature made for entertainment especially, does not acknowledge the importance of race in context of racialized societies. Morrison commented on this within her essay which examined race in literature:

“One likely reason for the paucity of critical material on this large and compelling subject is that, in matters of race, silence and evasion have historically ruled literary discourse. Evasion has fostered another, substitute language in which the issues are encoded, for closing open debate. The situation is aggravated by the tremor that breaks into discourse on race. It is further complicated by the fact that the habit of ignoring race is understood to be a graceful, even generous, liberal gesture (11).”

Her intention with this essay, as well as the novel, is to have the reader recognize their role in racial discourse. In America, standards that oppress or silence certain people were set but remain upheld by the citizens. It is our responsibility, therefore, to reflect on ourselves as we try to have a global perspective on issues that stand in our own societies.

Beauty standards based on ideas of white superiority has become an international standard, especially in the age of social media. *Americanah* by Amanda Ngozi Adichie offers a modern perspective on what effect the social conditioning of Americans has on a global scale. The main character, Ifemelu, reiterates the fact that moving to America is what made her become aware of her skin color. In Africa, she didn’t feel as if she was black because there were no exclusions or unsaid social norms. The first hint of this comes early on, when she is on the train from Princeton, New Jersey to Trenton. She notices that as the train moves away from the predominantly white area, the crowds thin out and the number of black, “fat” people increase.

The representation of the treatment and value of black people in America is shown through the train ride and the mere fact that she had to go all the way to Trenton to get her hair braided correctly. The hair braiding, although not stated early on, symbolizes a mark of her leaving America to go back to Lagos. She was in a way freeing herself from the imposed beauty standards on black women in America that she learned from her Aunt Uju:

“‘Later’, she said, ‘I have to take my braids out for my interviews and relax my hair... If you have braids, they will think you are unprofessional.’

‘So there are no doctors with braided hair in America?’ Ifemelu asked.

‘I have told you what they told me. You are in a country that is not your own. You do what you have to do if you want to succeed.’ There it was again, the strange naïveté with which Aunt Uju had covered herself like a blanket. Sometimes, while having a conversation, it would occur to Ifemelu that Aunt Uju had deliberately left behind something of herself, something essential, in a distant and forgotten place. Obinze said it was the exaggerated gratitude that came with immigrant insecurity (146).”

The use of “they” in this paragraph describes a collective group. “They” is not a person here, but more so societal norms that are enforced through the inability to succeed if not followed. Aunt Uju repeats the use of “they” in the same sense throughout this dialogue. She acknowledged the power held by the society that white Americans created to benefit them dictates what and who can succeed professionally. “Strange naïveté” is very subjective to how Ifemelu views her aunt and the way she survives in America. At this point, Ifemelu wants to perpetuate the culture she grew up with in Lagos and how she understands success. Being so set on making it in America, Uju became complacent with the way society made her conform, however far from her true self it may be. This is a sad truth that the book awakened me to -- I did not realize how easily the American society can force people to suppress their daily practices and even their appearance in order to assimilate to what America wants people to reflect.

In my own experience with societal standards affecting the impressionable minds of the youth, I have seen my own niece question her beauty. At the young age of eight years old, my

niece Aija comes to me with questions I never thought I would have to answer, although I did recognize the reality of how the media standardizes beauty. Aija watches the Disney Channel, where most of the main characters are blonde, white girls. She admires them not for their humor or for their accomplishments within the show, but she admires the girls' flowing hair and their big, bright eyes. Her curious mind wanders to why she is different – why does her skin color and hair texture change her self-worth? While the characters in *The Bluest Eye* did not get the reassurance that they are beautiful despite what society tells them, I try to reinforce the idea of individualistic beauty in Aija. Over time, she will come to realize that her worth is not defined by others, but who she is as a person.

The beauty standards women are held to in America can be directly traced back to racism. Long-standing injustice toward African-Americans have cultivated negative effects, such as societal standards of beauty and personal worth. Standards for appearance and behavior cultivate a society that marginalizes people, and it is a global issue that has been around for centuries. As I will explore in the following section, injustice has always been felt and observed throughout history.

Injustice

When speaking of injustice, I find it hard to start anywhere other than the injustice that the United States is built on. By closely analyzing the work of African-American authors such as James Baldwin, Ta-Nehisi Coates, and Jesmyn Ward, I was able to chronologically see the expression of frustration, confusion, and fear. Baldwin's *The Fire Next Time* was a sentimental recognition of the state of the country and a sort of offered advice to his nephew. Throughout the two essays that the book comprises of, he uses cautionary and confrontational language to articulate the racial issue within America in the 1960's. A certain passage from the book

summarizes the injustice that prevails in America to this day, although strides have been made in equality, African Americans are still not systematically equal:

“Time and time and time again, the people discover that they have merely betrayed themselves into the hands of yet another Pharaoh, who, since he was necessary to put the broken country together, will not let them go. Perhaps, people being the conundrums that they are, and having so little desire to shoulder the burden of their lives, this is what will always happen. But at the bottom of my heart I do not believe this. I think that people can be better than that, and I know that people can be better than they are. We are capable of bearing a great burden, once we discover that the burden is reality and arrive where reality is. Anyway, the point here is that we are living in an age of revolution, whether we will or no, and that America is the only Western nation with both the power and, as I hope to suggest, the experience that may help to make these revolutions real and minimize the human damage. Any attempt we make to oppose these outbursts of energy is tantamount to signing our death warrants (90-91).”

The tone of this passage seems to suggest a sort of hopelessness in the way people allow themselves to be controlled. Also, the word choice here contrasts with most of the text; he predominately used distinctions between people of different colors, Baldwin is beginning to say “people” as a collective term to make a summative statement about humankind – the way he believes we should view each other for the sake of our survival as a nation/planet. Baldwin uses an aphorism to sum up how he views our abilities to take control of the way we view ourselves and others. It is an absolute statement about humanities capabilities if we accept that the only fact is we all experience the fact of death and all other concerns are trivial and dated. Baldwin concludes this point by enforcing the idea that going against the natural flow of society’s need to evolve is not a substantial option to make. The generations of people learning about life’s truths the way Baldwin did and the country we live in have the capability to make a new shift though, progressing past tolerance and into acceptance. I feel that his language is carefully thought out here to convey the critical message that he hopes the readers will take away. His discussion of injustice is accompanied by a proposal as to how it can progressively improve, although his discourse on race is of the 20th century.

Another author who contributed to my understanding of the injustice that is common amongst many African Americans is Jesmyn Ward. In her collection of essays titled *The Fire This Time*, she starts where Baldwin left off. Baldwin's tone, although cautionary and critical, remains optimistic and wishful. Since Ward's work is contemporary to my experience of America's racism issue, I was able to clearly see the continuation of assessing everyone's role in the racism that is upheld in our country. In one of the essays within *The Fire This Time*, Isabel Wilkerson covers the modern state of African Americans -- somewhere between free and still enslaved in a nuanced way:

“The past few months have forced us to confront our place in a country where we were enslaved for far longer than we have been free [...] It is as if we have reentered the past and are living in a second Nadir: It seems the rate of police killings now surpasses the rate of lynchings during the worst decades of the Jim Crow era. There was a lynching every four days in the early decades of the twentieth century. It's been estimated that an African American is now killed by police every two to three days. The outcomes in Staten Island and Ferguson and elsewhere signal, as in the time of Jim Crow, that the loss of black life at the hands of the authorities does not so much as merit further inquiry and that the caste system has only mutated with the times. From this, we have learned that the journey is far from over and that we must know our history to gain strength for the days ahead. We must love ourselves even if – and perhaps especially if – others do not. We must keep our faith even as we work to make our country live up to its creed. And we must know deep in our bones and in our hearts that if the ancestors could survive the Middle Passage, we can survive anything (61).”

The author offers an uplifting notion of courage amongst those who have felt the injustice of racialized America. Referencing the Middle Passage shows just how long people have been facing the injustice derived from racialized societies.

Injustice for black people has been present ever since the colonization of Africa began. One particular text that is prevalent in exploring colonialism and its racialized agenda is taught in many primary schools. I first read *Heart of Darkness* by Joseph Conrad when I was 14 years old. It does not seem that long ago that I read it from the perspective I was taught -- what did the darkness symbolize and what traits did the complex characters of Kurtz and Marlow comprise

of? We did not spend the time to discuss the historical orientation of the plot or the detrimental force the colonizers were to Africa -- its people and the land. Our fast-paced, test reliant class did not pause to consider the hypocrisy of the Company that called natives of Africa “uncivilized savages” while acting in violent and uncivilized ways themselves. Evidently, at the time my classmates and I were aware of the malice nature of the Company and the malevolent treatment of the people they enslaved, but the conversation about it was not prioritized over learning the characters names and plot points for a comprehension test.

The second time I read *Heart of Darkness*, I was able to read it at my own pace, digest it, and connect the dehumanization of the natives in the imperialist age to the dehumanization of black people that is still perpetuated today. With recent police brutality against people of color, dehumanization has taken a modern form in American culture as nuanced and blatant discrimination. When police officers fire unwarranted shots at people and murder them yet does not get sentenced, it makes a statement. It says that because the officer has an authority and the person who is shot is black, even if they are a child, their families rarely see the justice that they deserve. In both *The Fire This Time* and *Between the World and Me*, the authors address this national problem in much more eloquent terms and encompass the pain that comes from these tragedies. It is not humane to use the force that police do against innocent, unarmed black people and this can be traced back to the treatment of people of color in imperialist times. My second time reading *Heart of Darkness*, it was accompanied by a reading of Chinua Achebe’s essay, *An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's "Heart of Darkness."* It became clearer that *Heart of Darkness* was not written for the reason I had hoped – for awareness to be brought to the brutal truths of colonization and the selfishness and hypocrisy of imperialism. It seems more that

Conrad was not necessarily telling the story to rectify any malice thought on the natives, but more-so to express his feelings and apprehensions about the culture and lifestyle of Congolese.

Injustice is not limited to racialized matters, although it is prominently seen within racialized societies. It plays a part in the story of Roger Casement, but the injustice he faced was of Ireland's volition. The image he is painted in by history would show him as a traitor, but *Dream of the Celt* offered him a reprise. Much like *Heart of Darkness* and *Things Fall Apart*, Vargas Llosa's novel gives another perspective on the repercussions of colonialism. The story is told through Roger Casement's point of view, creating a biographical feel although it is a fictionalized novel about the real life of Casement. Llosa manages to convey the thoughts as if the reader is actually inside the mind of the Irishman who was ahead of his time in the aspect of global human rights – something that Llosa saw as blurred by history painting Casement solely as a traitor. His opinion on colonialism shifted because of his time in the Congo, where he went with the intention of aiding Belgium in “civilizing” the Congo, taking its natural resources like rubber. He recalls the injustices he sees while living there, how inhumanely the Congolese are treated by the colonizers. He saw the similar unjust and brutal treatment of people in Peru. The injustice he saw happening to people around the world could not be ignored, and the actions in his life that led to his imprisonment and death sentence were in the name of activism. It is only right then, to remember Casement the way Vargas Llosa shows his life -- as a man with complexities like our own who was remembered in a negative light by history while trying to do the moral thing.

Self-interest

Human nature relates all people, and it is instinct to maintain survival. The extension of this is the desire to preserve self-interests. For many people, these are linked and will always coincide. Certain characters seen throughout the texts exhibit this particular urgency to preserve the self, even if it requires greed and sacrifice. For example, in *The Poisonwood Bible*, the entire reason the Price's end up in Africa can be credited to Nathan Price's self-interest. He prioritized the spread of Christianity by his own voice more than the safety and comfortability of his wife and children. In his mind, this could be seen as completely selfless – he risked his family for the word of God to reach people who had not adopted the religion yet.

Another example of the intrinsic self-interest that people maintain is visible in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*. It is important to point out that while the faults of the character Okonkwo are where I'll draw the similarities in all humans from, regardless of their position of colonizer or colonized, Achebe wrote as a critic of imperialism. He showed the way Christianity and ethnocentrism found its way into cultures that faced violence in the wake of colonialism. The novel shows the perspective of those who were colonized and reveals that although they were the ones to go through the suffering caused by colonizers, there were still individuals with self-interested, self-sabotaging tendencies. Under the circumstances, it is obvious that it's innate to humans to try and hold on to traditions and values that one believes will best serve them. The rejection of Christianity and its missionaries is clear amongst most people within the community, but Achebe also shows the alternate side of self-interest -- the choice to follow a path that does not coincide with familial values and traditions. Okonkwo's son, Nwoye (who is described to be feeble, which contributes to Achebe's clear opinion on colonialist-forced conversions to Christianity), to show the occasion in which natives took to the imperialist agenda, creating a cultural divide in the community. Nwoye grew curious enough to not regard the arrival of the

colonizers as simply ineffective and invasive but traded his tradition for an identity he thought would better his life. Despite his son's countering choices, Okonkwo's entire contribution to the plot centers around his desire to upkeep his establishment as a strong man for the sake of traditional values. Okonkwo's actions resulted in his eventual exile and death. As a man who had prayed to his ancestors for protection against enemies and looked to nature in a way modern colonialists did not value, he was forced to cope with the invasion of his community by missionaries. In retrospect of the novel, all of Okonkwo's attempts to upkeep tradition were not only in the interest of himself, but were also to preserve the independence and functionality of the community he loved.

Actions born out of self-interest can easily become hypocritical. Hypocritical tendencies are exemplified in previous novels like *The Poisonwood Bible* by Barbara Kingsolver and *The Fire Next Time* by James Baldwin – both in different senses. In Baldwin's work, he discusses the hypocrisy of the church. He proposes the question: If we're all children of God, how could he place an entire community of people below others based off of his own creation of their skin color? He couldn't – and this is what causes Baldwin to stray from his faith. A similar journey takes place in the minds of the Price children. The entirety of Kingsolver's novel goes into this theme of hypocrisy. The Price family moved to the Congo to try and "civilize" the people there. Nathan Price believed he was spreading the will of God and showing people how to live a civilized life, but it was all in self-interest. The methods of living they took from America, such as farming and organized religion, did not translate to the Congolese people. This is something colonizers didn't want to consider, as power and commerce drove them to commit the atrocities they did, as explained by Vargas Llosa through Casement's story. Human lives were valued less than rubber and the profits it provided them with. It is incredibly inhumane to do so, and even

more hypocritical to call the occupied area of the Congo the “Congo Free State” when it’s people were anything but free. Human lives being belittled is something deeply rooted in our current society as well, as *The Bluest Eye* and *Between the World and Me* explored, commenting on the “plundering of black bodies” that has only become more nuanced in the modern world.

Although it is hard to imagine what living through any another time period would be like, these pieces of literature collectively establish a certain truth: part of what humans need to peacefully coexist is an understanding and participation of true altruism. Preserving the life of all is something that man has struggled with for ages, maybe based on a power complex or survival instincts that can become irrational. With a population bigger than it has ever been, I find myself wondering if we will ever exist on this planet with an understanding of the unity it gives us.

Mario Vargas Llosa gave a man who wondered similar things another chance at being remembered for the good he tried to do when he saw injustice and explain why his conviction was more complicated than one act of treason. He was a global citizen, therefore felt inclined to care deeply about the treatment of all people, and even act on it when it came to the place he felt most at home.

Innate self-interest, when negatively greedy, is closely associated with the way we desensitize certain tragedies or injustices in the world around us. For instance, the consistency of unwarranted deaths of unarmed citizens has desensitized some people to death. I see this in the way hashtags are passed around, prayers are submitted in the form of a tweet, but no action is taken against perpetrators within the court of law, as it should be. White men have gotten away with murder and it has been clearly shown to the public even as far as video evidence of the shots being fired. Along the same train of thought, gun violence in America is desensitized to protect an outdated amendment to keep firearms. People have shown that they value their right to

be armed more than the safety of human lives, including children. Self-interest is dangerous, and until people can come to terms with what sacrifice means on a larger scale, we may remain a desensitized society.

Desire for fulfillment

Although there is no definite answer as to what the meaning of life is, humans innately search for fulfillment throughout our lifetimes. Whether that fulfillment comes from personal, occupational, or philanthropic goals, we strive for these things in order to satisfy our desires and passions. Certain notions in the following texts reminded me of the drive I maintain to make something of my life. If not for the fulfillment of my own satisfaction, the fulfillment of others fuels my goal. I want to be a part of a publishing agency, particularly as an editor, in order to aid the journeys of authors who want their story heard globally. Giving them the opportunity to share their stories by accepting and building upon their ideas would bring me joy, regardless of the income. The balance of happiness and comfortability is something I value, and it is a privilege to do so. Some who may more financially, whatever the cause may be, often have to sacrifice one for the other. We share the common desire to fulfill our lives in a multitude of ways, either personal, occupational, or philanthropic.

Franz Kafka's *Metamorphosis* is a surrealist text that outlines the basic desires of one man. The story is told in the third person, so the reader is able to follow the thoughts of the protagonist and the actions of the surrounding company. When Gregor Samsa woke up one morning, he takes a moment to realize he'd turned into an insect. Initially, the story sounds absurd. However, like many absurdist authors, the themes found within the text convey basic desires amongst humans. As Gregor adjusted to being in this new body that was impossible to proceed with his job as a traveling salesman in, he looked to his family for assistance. He'd

always been the breadwinner for the family, but could no longer serve that purpose. The reader sees the steady decline in loyalty within the family as Gregor is no longer himself in their eyes. Even his sister Grete, who remained sympathetic longest, began to treat him “as if she was in the presence of a serious invalid or a total stranger (30).” Her own self-interest changed her perception of taking care of her brother. At first, she was empathetic to his situation and cared for him out of kindness. As time passed, though, she began to regard caring for Gregor as an obligation and a burden. She took over the financial role Gregor had in the family. The change within Grete is the reason Gregor ends up completely alone – she proposes the family get rid of him. The moment Gregor knows he is no longer seen as himself and only causes pain for his family, he dies alone in his room. This bleak ending is a harsh truth that comes from failed fulfillment – the purpose of life evades him when he becomes immobile and nonfunctional as a person. The language that follows his death becomes increasingly more pleasant and has a hopeful tone. All of the family emotes a sense of relief once they are void of Gregor’s presence.

In a series of tweets released on Twitter by Jennifer Egan, “Black Box” was published in an especially contemporary way. The format of the initial release affects the way the story is consumed to a certain degree. The work is contemporary in not only the way it was released, but also the technological aspect of the plot and the reversed gender roles throughout.

The text is presented in second-person. Because of this point of view, it is presented as an instructive guide on living as a “beauty.” A nameless protagonist leads the plot, acting as a spy and sacrificing herself for no recognition. The second person narrative provides any reader to glimpses of what it feels like to be a woman. Although the plot makes the story slightly futuristic, the sentiments throughout are accessible. The characters desire to fulfill her mission seems more urgent than self-preservation: “Remember that, should you die, your Field

Instructions will provide a record of your mission and lessons for those who follow. (43)” This implies that even if she were to fail, there would be another “beauty” to take her place. A few of the texts I have covered so far, and now including “Black Box,” are written with a theme of the undervaluing of intelligent women. For example, Egan creates a character who is strong and intellectual, but also mindfully uses her body to manipulate.

Unlike most narratives, throughout "Black Box" Egan does not use signposting language. There are no cues to know what has changed as it changes – it is a jumpy text that is meant to keep the reader a bit in the dark. Maybe this effect is intentional and relative to the main character’s role of a government spy – a technological advancement in the form of a human. The way she directs the text at the audience by writing as if it is a how-to manual makes it much more personal. It sounds as if the reader is being directed or as if we are hearing the directions she has been given by the government she works for. She does not give away much of the background of characters – a purposefully used method made possible by delivering the text through tweets. Although Egan uses the medium as a contemporary way to share a story, it was a bit more structured than most Twitter fiction. Egan was able to construct the release times of the tweets, predetermined by how she wanted the story read – giving her a more personal touch in the publication step. She upheld a traditional method of allowing the readers to interpret the text themselves, despite the ability to comment on her own work right where her readers do as well. The choice to not add to the text once it was all published left room for interpretation for the audience - such as questions of whether or not it could be considered a feminist text or why the main character chose to give her life to the government for the honor. The mystery that could easily be lost in the briefness of the tweets is compensated for in the voice the author gives to the

main character, which works as a mysterious element that is not given background but serves as an emotionally accessible female figure.

Before getting into the style and content of my second short story choice, I want to recapture what caught my eye about it. I was searching for acclaimed short story authors and while I was searching for New York authors who piqued my interest (Egan) I also saw Zadie Smith's name, a London native. I had heard the name before but I never picked up a work of hers, her name just stayed on my TBR list. I was intrigued because I enjoyed reading perspectives on London after living there for a short year. "The Embassy of Cambodia" covers themes of class discrimination and the exploitation of female workers. The short story follows a woman, Fatou, who immigrated to England from the Ivory Coast. The character's background provides an outside perspective on the culture of England in regard to status and working women. Fatou works for a rich family without pay, although she has shelter and food from the job. The situation she is in is common amongst immigrant women who work for wealthy households. Although the setting of the short story is London, exploitation of domestic working women is a global issue. In-home care and related occupations are typically seen as jobs done by women. This undeniable fact is relevant to the way women have been viewed in society for so long. In texts such as *The Bluest Eye* and *The Poisonwood Bible*, the oppression/exploitation of women by men is a common theme despite differences in the setting; Cholly's heinous act against his own daughter and Nathan's control over the women in his family are just the surface. Despite Fatou's education, which she values above all else, her potential is ignored and she is employed to do more menial labor although she is capable of so much more. Even within the job, she is disrespected by the children she watches over and the mother of the children physically assaulted her with no repercussions. Like many characters in the texts I have read, Fatou is a

strong woman in her essence but the outside world places her in an undervalued position.

Although, Fatou does not see herself as a slave. She compared her situation to the kidnapping and transportation of Africans against their will, whereas she traveled with her father and ended up in London. Fatou assures herself that her situation is not *that* terrible when considering what others have gone through, but the reader can plainly see the lack of value assigned to her through the occupation she was stuck in.

The lack of value placed on women as individuals can be seen in Egan's "Black Box" as well. The protagonist works not for compensation, but knowing that she may be able to help the "good guys." Her life specifically is not the main purpose of this story, but the work she does as a "beauty" is applicable to any woman who chooses this occupation. For this reason, her body stores the information she acquires so it is not imperative that she survives to relay the info. There is a certain detachment that comes with her mission, whether it be in the sexual encounters she must face or the moment she must face death. Although Fatou does not face the life and death situation as imminently, she is undervalued in the way the "beauty's" individuality is. Throughout "The Embassy of Cambodia," Fatou reflects on her place in the country. The significance of the Embassy itself is a regular-looking building in Willesden. A tall brick wall surrounds the Embassy, hiding the goings-on from the public. The book is structured by short chapters titled 0-1, 0-2, 0-3, etc., resembling the score of a badminton game. This is because of what Fatou sees on her way to the public pool she often swims in; she sees a shuttlecock going back and forth, the speed of it going from aggressively fast to a relaxed volley back. The mention of the badminton game is intentional in that primarily, Fatou regarded the Embassy building as a bleak reminder of the tragic events that have taken place in Cambodia. The mundane game being played shows the ability people have to disregard tragedy and continue on with pleasurable

hobbies. The last line in the short story shows the duality of people's expectations through the metaphor of a badminton game; "As if one player could imagine only a violent conclusion and the other only a hopeful return (0-21)." Fatou manages to remain the hopeful one, seeing the loss of her job as a new start rather than an unfair, abrupt disappointment while society doubts her – "a violent conclusion." Personally, Fatou gave me the motivation to remain optimistic in order to achieve my own goals. Despite the way outsiders view her, she remains confident that things will work out even if it is not according to the previous plan.

Overall, both of these texts analyze how society views women in regard to their occupation. There are, of course, different degrees to which women are discriminated against. Fatou had to face the reality that she is treated poorly because of where she comes from, and recognizes that African women are always subject to this discrimination because of institutionalized and individualized racism. On the other hand, the unnamed protagonist in "Black Box" was meant to carry out a mission that risked her life for the sake of a greater cause. The job was carried out by a woman because she had to be subjected to the male gaze in order to get the information she needed for her profession. I usually do not opt to read short stories because I find myself wanting more information on characters to be immersed in the plot, but both of these stories manage to satisfy a thought-provoking plot while still having an interesting dynamic.

Suffering

Pain is inevitable amongst every person, emotional and physical, but the pain I've experienced in my life is incomparable to that of the those I've read about. To gain a firmer understanding of that which I do not experience because of my geographical and temporal based life. The imposed suffering and loss worldwide cannot be understood with only a few books, but

every bit adds to the awareness that history is brutal and the present perpetuates its negativity. People everywhere are not free within their political systems, not free within their marriages, and not free within their own bodies. A few examples of these commonalities can be found in the texts of Coates, Baldwin, El Saadawi, and Vargas Llosa. The way pain is portrayed through diction that differs amongst all these authors is an example of emotional pain's subjectivity, but the emotion is the same. Pain can mingle with anger, frustration, hopelessness, or rebellion.

In Ta-Nahesi Coates' *Between the World and Me*, he depicts the pain that is felt in feeling that you do not own your body within a society that rejects you and the purpose your life carries. Being an African American, he warns his son of the injustices that he will come across in his own experience. Unlike Baldwin, who implies that people should lead with love to progress towards acceptance within America, Coates states that the fight is no longer for acceptance, but equality. The nuanced violence imposed on black people by a police force who is meant to protect them poses a major risk to any black person in America – a truth I came across years ago when I saw patterns in the news stories that emerged of unarmed people being killed by police. The ethnocentrism within police brutality elicits a kind of pain that I will not know firsthand in my life. I value Coates' words, as he truthfully but eloquently shows the internal struggle that living in a systematically prejudice society causes;

“Here is what I would like for you to know: In America, it is traditional to destroy the black body – *it is heritage*. Enslavement was not merely the antiseptic borrowing of labor – it is not so easy to get a human being to commit their body against its own elemental interest. And so, enslavement must be casual wrath and random mangleings, the gashing of heads and brains blown out over the river as the body seeks to escape. It must be rape so regular as to be industrial. There is no uplifting way to say this. I have no praise anthems, nor old Negro spirituals. The spirit and soul are the body and brain, which are destructible – that is precisely why they are so precious. And the soul did not escape/ The spirit did not steal away on gospel wings. The soul was the body that fed the tobacco, and the spirit was the blood that watered the cotton, and these created the first fruits of the American garden. (104-105)”

Another depiction of pain and its universality can be found in *Memoirs of a Woman Doctor*. Throughout the memoir, the reader sees the protagonist go through her life questioning her place in society. She is told one thing – that her role as a woman is to act as a caregiver, wife, and mother. Internally, she feels distanced from that even as a child. To know that you have to make an effort to be seen and heard in a respectable way is an internal struggle that is accompanied by emotional pain. This feeling is common amongst most women, as men tend to first approach us with our physicality in mind rather than what we have to intellectually contribute. The protagonist saw this in her first marriage; she was in love with the idea of being loved, so much so, that she was initially blind to the way her husband planned to bind her for life in order to have a woman to take care of him. She recalls the inclination she had to doubt accepting his proposal:

“‘Would you like to live with me forever?’ He asked me this, looking at me like a motherless child. He aroused powerful maternal, humanitarian and altruistic instincts and desires in me, and I felt his need for me pulling me towards him and binding me to him. I looked at him tenderly and he asked me again, ‘Will you marry me?’ The word ‘marry’ thudded inside my head, driving all other thoughts to the back of my mind. What had it meant to me when I was a child? A man with a big belly. In my mind, the smell of the kitchen was the smell of marriage. I hated the word and I hated the smell of food. Without realizing what I was doing, I asked him, ‘Do you like food?’ (59)”

El Saadawi gives a concise walkthrough of the reproachful sentiments behind committing to a man for life. The use of adjectives such as “maternal” and “altruistic” articulate what it feels like to be convinced that marriage and commitment are what one is meant to do, although it may combat personal goals. I cannot relate to her particular situation, of course, but I can understand the feeling that I we are born into pre-conditions as women. I have begun to live for myself rather than in search for another, but the feeling finds its way back into my thoughts when I am surrounded by hallmark holidays and notions of love on social media.

The feeling of love is not always associated with marriage -- they are not mutually exclusive. This is very common in arranged marriages within eastern countries. Atiq Rahimi wrote in light of this, making an unnamed woman the protagonist of a story that is limited in setting, but not in themes that reflect human suffering. The woman suffers in oppressed silence until her husband is comatose from an accident in their war-torn town. The first aspect of the plot that I noticed was the vagueness of the setting. It did not seem to matter to the story, considering the war-ridden society and confinement to one building, applies to so many citizens across many different countries. The story unfolds within one room, which I feel added to the universality of the plot. Atiq Rahimi manages to make the reader understand an intimate part of the woman's mind, although we do not know her name. I admire a man who wants to tell the story of women who may not have the opportunity to in her own lifetime because of the circumstances that surround her. The character Rahimi created became a symbol of all women who repress their thoughts and feelings because of the threats men enforce in a household. Many women around the world are forced to suffer through domestic abuse and cannot change it themselves, in fear for their lives or their children's.

Rahimi also includes a theme of hypocrisy in regard to unequal marriages. It is apparent in the way the men claim to control their relationships in the callous way they do despite the valor they claim to have. This is comparable to the hypocrisy in the idea of colonization throughout the previously mentioned texts like *Heart of Darkness*, *Things Fall Apart*, and *The Poisonwood Bible*. These texts raise questions about the colonizers' declaration of a "just" cause for colonization of native groups. In all three novels, religion is posed as the symbol of a civilized people, along with industrialization and power. The values associated with Christianity directly contradicted the actions that occurred in the process of colonizing the people.

Enslavement, dehumanization, and the erase of cultural values flagged hypocritical actions throughout the texts. Morality, although a subjective and long-debated term, should carry the preservation of and respect for all human life. These actions did not exemplify this, but rather the savage tendencies that people holding too much power exhibit. I use the term savage by the definition of devastating and severe acts, as the colonizers treated native cultures and people in places like the Congo, not in the way Conrad chose to label a people he did not understand.

The Patience Stone, although short, is told in a way that describes the day-to-day life of women in places that does not offer them basic rights to life as men do. Their bodies and voices are owned by their men and it is only in silence that they can confess the damage it does to them. In the midst of war taking place outside their windows, these women fight battles in their own homes through forced complacency and undeniable bouts with the fragility of masculinity. This emotional pain can take a toll on a person's outlook on life, and leave many feeling restrained and the desire for fulfillment shows itself once again alongside emotional pain. I am lucky to not have such conditions outside my window or within my own home -- I am able to establish myself as an individual subject rather than in relation to a husband who does not my mind. My emotional and physical freedom is something that I do not take for granted, and even less so after reading the conditions of women in other countries.

Love

Although many of the texts I have read have induced dejected feeling about the world and its violent past and present, themes of love can be spotted throughout all of these texts. It comes in different forms -- love within a relationship, religious love, familial love, and self-love. I have seen all of these forms through this literary journey. It has become clear that love cannot

be excluded from the qualities that make us all intrinsically linked. Considering all texts include the value of love, I chose to focus on a few that exhibited the different forms we feel love in.

Primarily, self-love can be seen in the prioritization of oneself, despite what other people may desire from you. In *The Poisonwood Bible* by Barbara Kingsolver, the Price family begins as a cohesive unit, although the women were skeptical of the move. Throughout major events in the novel, such as the ant infestation that drove everyone out of their homes, distance begins to grow between the family and for some, even with their faith. The love they initially felt for their father and God disperses to other subjects. Since the story is told from the shifting perspectives of all five women in the family, the reader gains a wider scope of what the resulting choices are after being forced to partake in Nathan's mission. An instance of love and its ability to change a person, Leah, who had previously admired her father, realized the unnecessary and invasiveness of spreading Christianity. She distanced herself from it and found a new love in Anatole and she eventually creates a family with him. Her awakening to the violence and suffering that colonialism imposes on people moved her passion from following her father, to pursuing social justice alongside her husband. The choice this particular character made showed that compassion and morality can still be cultivated, even when being raised by a Baptist missionary. Kingsolver integrates a different mentality in the character of Rachel. Although she witnessed the same events as Leah, she remains vain and ignorant despite her permanent stay in Africa, where she ended up marrying rich. I believe the duality of these characters was important because it gave both a reassuring and troubling outcome. Readers can more easily empathize with Leah while they are simultaneously reminded of the evil nature of remaining ignorant and self-concerned.

In addition to self-love and religious love, examples of relationships, familial love, and lack thereof can be found in John Dos Passos' *Manhattan Transfer*. As a modernist text, the

structure is made to be a stream of consciousness style. The variety of perspectives (poor/rich, women/men, young/old) allows the reader to travel through the city and vicariously see things through the eyes of different characters. A few characters were reoccurring, while others gave just a short glimpse at a subjective point of view. Although there a plenty of examples of love's complexity within the text, such as affairs and internal struggles with sexuality, one character that moved me was Bud Korpenning. Bud arrived in New York on his own, distancing himself from where he grew up. His relationship with his father lacked warmth and sentiment. I feel that this detail of his life affected his future, as he showed up to New York City with no one and a dream. When his dreams could not be fulfilled, as he was incapable in his position without a home or resources. The lack of love in one's life can disillusion them into thinking that life does not have substance without success. From an early age, the image of love that one observes is dependent on those around them. If love is not shown to be a virtue, it will never be valued as such. Dos Passos' style of writing passes over the suicide of Bud with a brief recognition from a boat that is passing by. The captain utters an acknowledgment. He repeats "God damn it to hell (106)." It is telling of the inconvenience he feels, but his humanity still allows him to consider if the life could be saved. When he realized that Bud was already gone, the moment passes with a mere sarcastic comment, "A pretty thing to happen on a man's wedding day (106)." To someone who is uninvolved, a man's decision to take his own life is a fleeting moment that will not register much trouble in passing days. This is a harsh truth about suicide and homelessness – Dos Passos chose to not make the story revolve around Bud and give him a redeemable resolution. Although there are many factors of Bud's life that the reader was not given detail on, one can assume that the lack of opportunity he was born into and the lack of anyone to go through life with was detrimental to his mental health. The absence of love in Bud's life is reminiscent of

what caused Gregor's demise in *Metamorphosis*. Neglect from his family, the only people left around him in his state, abandoned him after some time. It was in the absence of care and sentimental human contact that he deteriorated. This shows the importance love has on maintaining our happiness. We cannot go without it, no matter the form it is presented in.

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Globally, there are clear differences that humans have acknowledged to set us apart; culture, geographical location, race, gender, and sexuality. We allow these things to define us, but rarely do we acknowledge that humans share the same condition. Commonalities can be identified by what humans intrinsically share. Facing injustice, dealing with pain and suffering, striving for personal, occupational, or philanthropic fulfillment, self-interest, and love all exist as common threads that define our humanity. This became more easily conceivable after I immersed myself in global literature. The diversity of the subject matter and authors allowed me to see how these aspects reach different parts of the world. I feel inclined, now more than ever, to travel more to make connections with people. However, the highest potential to reach the minds of people hundreds of miles away from me rests within literature. In the future, I plan to continue using literature as a device for cultivating a global awareness and eventually contribute to the publication of these imperative stories of the human experience.

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