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Marxism and Feminism in *Small Island*

Andrea Levy's novel *Small Island* follows the development of characters with diverse backgrounds who are all connected under the blanket of Mother England. The novel examines the relationship of England to the lands and citizens under its empire. Being the single country in charge of multiple faraway lands gives Britain a sense of superiority over fellow subjects. The British empire undeniably instituted a system to keep its territories in order, and with the commencement of war comes one of the system's fruitions: the need for soldiers from the Jamaican commonwealth. We can closely examine *Small Island* to see how the ideas of Marxism are highly prevalent in the British military systems of wartime and follow the movement of women breaking out from traditional house roles and closer to autonomy with every passing war. By conducting Marxist and Feminist readings of Levy's *Small Island*, we can further understand the impacts of underlying social and economic structures under the extreme conditions of a world war.

The wartime apparatus parallels the economic ideas of Karl Marx. Chapter four of the novel features a scene in which Hortense and a school friend observe the training of Jamaican soldiers due to fight for England. We can see their portrayal as pawns in the system of war, "manoeuvring as balletic as birds" to "commands that soared so loud into the air they were almost visible" (Levy 58). These Jamaican soldiers are going to fight for England under the influence of Marx's idea of false consciousness, where England pressures this commonwealth island to send troops to her aid while those that enlist believe they are doing so on their own will. In this way, England can exploit the Jamaicans for her own gain, much like the bourgeoisie do

with the proletariat in Marxist theory, all while sending thousands of men to meet their untimely deaths. Gilbert, a soldier fighting for England in the novel, questions the nature of this one-sided relationship with his statement, “It was inconceivable that we Jamaicans, we West Indians, we members of the British Empire would not fly to the Mother Country's defence when there was a threat. But, tell me, if Jamaica was in trouble, is there any major, any general, any sergeant who would have been able to find that dear island?” (118). He explains how the readiness of Jamaicans to help England is countered by the Mother Country's lack of knowledge about its territory, which would stand in the way should England need to return the favor. Yet the pressures to join the war effort are felt back in England as well, with all of society both feeling and taking part in creating a sense of obligation to join the fight. “With us having to import Yanks and him still wearing what he liked, he was self-conscious, apologetic, even,” Levy writes on the coercion of Bernard to join the Royal Air Force (RAF), where society has told him he must feel ashamed for not having jumped on the homefront bandwagon (237). Another curious aspect about fighting in a war is that if someone is to sign up willingly, before being drafted, they are offered a sense of leeway in choosing their field of service. This is Marx's concept of the illusion of choice, where soldiers feel in control of their decision while doing exactly what those with real power want them to do. Bernard explains, “The poor bloody infantry. Everyone knew [...] that if a man was conscripted, he went straight into the army. Gun under his arm, tin hat on his head and a bullet in his back. I didn't need persuading. It was the RAF for me. If I was going to go, I wanted to go as a boy in blue” (284). Once a part of the RAF, Bernard learns that the rules set in place by the higher ups cannot be questioned. After running to his burning camp to try and save his friend, Bernard receives a prison sentence for absentmindedly leaving his weapon at his assigned guardpost. The correctional officer assigned to Bernard's case will not

hear or accept his pleas, saying, "Discipline must be maintained" (328). He is too young to have fought in the first World War and by just doing what he is told to do, following the rule book, and unquestioning the ethics of such black and white decisions, he misses signs of the Indians' guilt and sends Bernard to prison (325). Viewed from a Marxist lens, the officer's refusal to hear Bernard's explanation for abandoning his post and rifle can be attributed to Marx's term consent, which says the participants in an institution blindly accept the conditions set forth by those in power. Marxist theory highlights how the officer's behavior is not an indicator of his character, but of the configuration of military offenses.

A second theoretical lens that stands out in *Small Island* is Feminism. In the novel, we get a complete narrative of protagonist Queenie's life starting from her childhood, through courtship and marriage, and to motherhood. We as readers follow her development in the face of external circumstances like the demands of society before, during, and after the tumultuous WWII period. We can also see how Queenie is a product of her times through a shifting feminist perspective. From a young age, Queenie had no agency in the world. First her father makes decisions for her family, then she marries Bernard and he becomes the one calling the shots while Queenie turns into a housewife. The house and its decoration are traditionally the woman's responsibility, but before Bernard left for war, he would not let Queenie as much as pull back the curtains to let light into a room, much less move around furniture. Every one of her suggestions are met with a shaking of Bernard's head and an explanation of "I've got my reasons" for the rejection of each (217). Slowly, as all implications of a marriage settle in, Queenie's enthusiasm for Bernard's not wanting her to work vanishes. Paying no mind to Bernard's protests and pushing against his lack of empathy, she finds a job at a non-profit organization providing help to bombed-out refugees. Mid-war, while Bernard is away, Queenie takes a stab at the patriarchal system by purposefully

undermining Bernard's wishes by taking in black tenants, starting with Gilbert and later taking in his friends and wife. She makes this decision partly as a power move for herself and partly because her husband would never have let her (97). Queenie takes back her agency for good by kicking her husband out of the room when she is about to give birth and only allowing Hortense, a female tenant of the house, to stay and help.

Second-wave feminism comes into play on the question of whether Hortense, as a person of color, should be included in the feminist movements happening in post-WWII England. On an outing, Queenie tells Hortense that since she is seen as a visitor to England, she must step off the sidewalk into the road whenever she sees a British person approaching from the opposite direction (277). Although Hortense hears this suggestion from Queenie, it is important to note that its source is not Queenie, rather her neighbor Mr Todd, who is known for taking an egocentric stance of England in relation to the rest of the world. Previously, Mr Todd came to tell Queenie the story of how his white sister was forced to step off onto the road when two women of color came towards her on a sidewalk, and Queenie is so horrified by this event that she passes the hint on to Hortense (99). Another way in which Hortense gets secluded from the benefits enjoyed by white British women is in getting declined a job at her dream school. The secretaries behind the desk are white women and there are likely white women teachers at the school, so it is not a case of sexism when Hortense is rejected without being offered a proper interview on her merits.

Through this methodology-focused analysis of Andrea Levy's *Small Island*, we can see how Marxist ideas are applied to the extremity that is war and how Feminist perspectives evolve in the eyes of both British society and Queenie Bligh's lifetime. Marxist and Feminist readings are somewhat conflicting when it comes to the changing role of women in British society. While

the opportunity to work outside of the home presents women with the freedom to pursue their passions, like with Queenie helping victims of bombing, this still feeds directly into the capitalist working system that fuels the economy. If Hortense was to get that teaching job, she would have become another worker able to be manipulated by those higher up in the chain of command, namely British white men. This sparks the inter-theoretical question of whether a woman can maintain the liberty she fought for if it leads her to participate in some variant of an assembly line.

Works Cited

Levy, Andrea. *Small Island*. Picador, 2010.