

“Being Violent”: Critiquing Masculinity and Capitalism in Joyce Carol Oates’s *Zombie*

Payel Pal

Humanities and Social Sciences Department
Indian Institute of Technology
Kanpur

Abstract: This paper focuses on Joyce Carol Oates’s *Zombie* (1995) as a compelling critique of the patriarchal co-option of violence as socially efficacious and regenerative. If in representing the monstrous psyche of Quentin P, a serial killer who practices ice-pick lobotomy on his victims, Oates ushers her readers into a gothic world of dread and terror, then the narrative no less carries graver social undertones in probing such malevolent perversities. This paper studies Oates’s novel as unveiling America’s obsession with masculinity and heroism vis-à-vis the privileging of violence which escalates racism and jeopardizes the lot of commoners. Against the backdrop of the cultural observations made by Richard Slotkin (in *Regeneration through Violence*), Susan Faludi (in *The Terror Dream*) and James Gilligan (in *Violence: Reflections on a National Epidemic*), the paper analyzes how in *Zombie* violence becomes the apparatus to perpetuate phallogocentric norms. It also highlights Oates’s interrogation of the structures and assumptions of capitalism that goad individuals toward violence.

Keywords: Violence, Masculinity, Capitalism, Joyce Carol Oates, Serial killer.

In much of her fiction Joyce Carol Oates, one of the most celebrated contemporary American women writers derides the nation’s patriarchal co-option with violence seeking to uncover the malaise blighting it. Condemning violence that is often deemed redemptive in the nation’s culture, Oates, a humanist at heart, registers how America’s obsession with violence debilitates the lives of ordinary human beings. Reprimanding the prevalence of violence that finds vindication in the capitalist dispensation of America, Oates in her novels such as *Broke Heart Blues*, *What I Lived For* and *Carthage* demonstrates how violence, privileged as an attribute of strong masculinity, abets predatory drives in contemporary America. Testifying to her reformatory vigor, Oates’s fiction provides an incisive critique of phallogocentric violence that panders to heinous notions of heroism and manhood. Keeping in view Oates’s misgivings about cultural championing of violence, the present essay seeks to analyze her humanist credentials in *Zombie* that indict the capitalist order for its complicity with patriarchy in celebrating violence.

Before proceeding further to discuss Oates’s critique of capitalism vis-à-vis masculinity in *Zombie*, a brief overview of the socio-historical phenomenon of violence in America assumes significance. Since its founding, America has internalized the spirit of violence that finds manifestation in various cultural and political assumptions. If seen historically, the eighteenth and nineteenth-century frontier narratives testify to this championing of violence as intrinsic to construct a powerful ‘white’ nation. Richard Slotkin’s *Regeneration through Violence: The Mythology of the American Frontier, 1600-1860* (1973), a significant study of the American frontier narratives, discusses the

eneration of the frontier hero as much for his masculine “acts of predation” (557) as for bringing about a national salvation through those aspiring acts. As Slotkin insightfully argues, “the hunter myth provided a justification for the process by which wilderness was to be expropriated and exploited [and] it did so by seeing that process in terms of heroic adventure, of the initiation of hero into a new way of life and higher state of being” (554). Further, this “myth of regeneration” if it “enable[d] the [white male American] to exploit and lay waste the land as a means of transforming and improving it and converting it into . . . [a] world of dreams” (Slotkin 555), then, it also tacitly sanctified his “predatory . . . habits” (Slotkin 556) on the natives as “part of the progressive extension of civilization and progress” (Slotkin 556). Such retributive notion of violence impinged on the collective psyche gradually evolved into the “structuring metaphor of American experience” (Slotkin 5). No wonder, down the centuries the American idea of progress and social stability became irreversibly associated with rugged masculinity gained through regenerative violence.

In examining the cultural phenomenon of violence, Susan Faludi’s *The Terror Dream: Myth and Misogyny in an Insecure America* (2007) also continues Slotkin’s critique of violence. By foregrounding the media representations of the post 9/11 terrorist attacks on America, Faludi shows how the images of frightened women and hapless citizens seeking justice from the ‘bold warriors’ undoubtedly depict the capitalist visions of redemptive masculinity. Discussing a wide-range of narratives from the American superhero movies that include *The Searchers* and *The War of the Worlds* to cult fictions such as James Fennimore Cooper’s *The Last of the Mohicans*, Faludi justifiably argues that the American hero’s capacity to perpetrate violence had always been celebrated as part of his identity, that of a “larger-than-life . . . rescuer” (322). Needless to say, the political responses and the media coverage of the post-9/11 period “replay a rendition of [this] oldest national myth” (Faludi 271) of the invincible American male shielding the country from evil. If the mass slaughter in the nineteenth-century was driven by a virulent desire to rid the nation of the native population and thereby purify it, then, contemporary America’s mission to decimate the terrorists also draws inspiration from the promise of social rejuvenation vis-à-vis the appropriation of violent masculinity. Arguably, Faludi concludes that this notion of violent manhood as intrinsic to national stability is being continually reinforced, thanks to the American media and its advertising industry.

Likewise, the noted psychologist, James Gilligan in his analysis of the “brutalizing and dehumanizing prison system” (24) of America in *Violence: Reflections on a National Epidemic* (1997) also traces the cultural dogma of violence to the “abstractly conceived notion of justice and punishment of evil” (23). Admonishing the culture of violence, the psychologist views it as a malady emasculating “the United States . . . [with] the highest rates of criminal violence of Western democracy or, for that matter, of any economically developed nation on earth” (24). Gilligan exposes the violence-ridden American imagination through a reading of Melville’s *Moby Dick*, a cult fiction, in which Captain Ahab’s “obsession with retributive justice” (23) drove him to “kill Moby Dick” because it was only through such an act that “[Ahab] would destroy the evil and restore justice to the world” (23). Perceptively, the psychologist argues that the nation’s overriding objective of abolishing crime either by killing or “immobilizing” (23) the wrong-doers stems from the cultural privileging of violence. Laced with sarcasm,

Gilligan expresses his dismay thus: “What else are our endless, futile, and self-defeating crusades, called the ‘War on Crime’ and the ‘War on Drugs’ but our version of the voyage of the *Pequod*?”(23). In his study of the American prison system, the psychologist comes to terms with the notion of violence that prevails either as salvaging or retributive. Pertinently, Slotkin, Faludi and Gilligan in focusing on different facets of American culture and history ably record the nation’s perennial investment in violence.

Against the backdrop of such cultural discourses on violence, Oates’s fictions sharpen our understanding of the novelist’s humanist outlook that deplores America’s pervasive violence sanctioned by patriarchy. Importantly, Oates’s sensibility on this subject is also informed by an understanding of American capitalism as thriving on violence. Discerning in her portrayals of the prevailing social climate, Oates expresses her indignation at the escalating violence vis-à-vis concepts of heroism and masculinity. Clarifying to Lucinda Franks in 1980 that “when people say there is too much of violence in Oates, what they are saying is there is too much reality in life” (93), Oates in her fictions uncovers the massive upsurge in crime in contemporary America. Perceiving violence as ubiquitous on the American landscape, the novelist avers that “I did not create the streets of Detroit. When I write about a man who murders or commits suicide, where do I get the idea from? From a hundred different sources, from the violence and cynicism that is part of our national character” (Franks 93). Evidently, in depicting the spine-chilling instances of murder, child kidnapping, school shootouts and killing, Oates cautions how the nation’s overriding fascination with violence is increasingly jeopardizing the lives of the common Americans. While the poignant tales of murder form the core of Oates’s early novels such as *Expensive People* (1968), *Wonderland* (1971) and *The Assassins: A Book of Hours* (1975), the novelist’s late fictions offer more penetrating insights into the egregious romanticizing of violence and manhood. For instance, the author’s *Zombie* (1995) and *Daddy Love* (2013) delineate the torturous psyche of the American men who seek perverse gratification in killing others. Needless to say, through the narratives of sadistic killers Oates depicts the dangers underlying the consumerist ethos of America. For instance, the cultural preoccupation with “the serial killers has developed so far that . . . [people in America now] purchase the nail clippings and hair of some killers, as if they were religious icons” (Schmid 3). Recently, in *High Crime Area: Tales of Darkness and Dread* (2014) and *Prison Noir* (2014), the novelist explores the morbid psychologies of murderers. Oates in her committed endeavor thus seeks to understand the cultural asymmetries that aggravate violence in today’s America. Ellen G. Friedman notes “whether in the form of gluttons as in *Expensive People*; overreachers such as Dr. Pedersen in *Wonderland* and Jean Pierre in *Bellefleur*, who attempts to establish a sovereignty of his own within the borders of the US, or the inventor John Quincy Zinn . . . Oates increasingly associates [her characters] with [the] masculinized ideas of nation and of the US in particular” (Friedman 484). In this context, Oates’s recent novel *Carthage* (2014) also provides an illuminating example. In narrating the story of a psychically distressed young Iraq war veteran who later murders a girl in his locality, *Carthage* tellingly brings to light the underside of the megalomaniac America. The novel protests against the power-hungry nation that preys on societies and individuals. Precisely, Oates deconstructs the hegemony of violence vis-à-vis masculinity in the American capitalist dispensation.

Continuing this argument, this essay examines how *Zombie* foregrounds masculinity and heroism vis-à-vis the privileging of violence as causes of psycho-social exclusion and disasters. Chronicling the bizarre tale of a homosexual serial killer, Oates's *Zombie* stridently explores the pervasiveness of violence in contemporary America. A middle-class white American, Quentin P's adulation of mindless violence provides a glimpse of the darker capitalist pathologies. A psychopath obsessed with the idea of creating zombies, he represents an extremely perverted form of American heroism. In centralizing Quentin's psychic aberrations, Oates provides a compelling critique of the capitalist society that ruthlessly appropriates and executes power. Accordingly, the novel with its focus on Quentin's malefic proclivities bespeaks the coercive temperament inherent in the capitalist ideology. Oates's fiction delineates how the capitalist ethic of annihilating the vulnerable puts the ethnic others in jeopardy. In so doing Oates, through the narrative of Quentin P in *Zombie*, exposes the racial fault lines underlying the ideals of regenerative violence.

Like Oates's *Blonde* and *Black Water* that are inspired by real life stories, *Zombie* also draws on the story of Jeffery Dahmer of Milwaukee who was allegedly a homosexual murderer known for brutally dismembering the bodies of victims. In portraying Quentin's insane yearning to transform human beings into zombies by practicing ice-pick lobotomy on them, Oates's novel leads the readers into a gothic world of bone-chilling terror. As Cynthia Tompkins states: "The vivid depiction of the intersection of race, class, violence, and desire adds a Gothic appeal to the novel" (693). Ironically, Quentin's repeated failures in experiments that lead to the killing of his victims turn him into a maniac. Despite the gory depictions of his perversity, Oates's novel is not a sensational thriller but a clear testimony to ingrained social evils. Thus, Oates's narrative of a serial killer in delineating the capitalist culture's penchant for mystifying violence condemns the society for creating such monsters. More important, in dramatizing Quentin's desires, ambitions, frustrations and discontent, Oates traces the genesis of his grotesque psyche to the phallogocentric norms of the capitalist society.

In *Zombie*, Quentin comes from a traditionally affluent American family. Scion of a distinguished family who is weaned on the belief that manhood is tantamount to social glory or stellar intellectual achievements, Quentin, since childhood, awe-inspired by his father develops a morbid sense of inferiority. Though he has an extraordinary "I.Q. ... [of] 121" (*Zombie* 3) as a high school student, he lacks the enthusiasm for either winning a "scholarship" or exhibiting his skills in the "sports teams, school newspaper or yearbook" (*Zombie* 4). Undoubtedly, his reluctance to become a man of success turns out to be a matter of deep regret for the family. Contrary to his distinguished father, a Harvard graduate with "Ph.D. ... in both physics and philosophy" (23) and a celebrated professor, Quentin has a lacklustre scholastic record which shames and depresses him. Admitted to part-time courses in the Dale Technological County College, he regularly attends classes but shows extreme indifference to learning. If Quentin behaves as a responsible and obedient son outwardly, deep inside him, he is torn by a pathological hatred of his elders.

Perceptibly, Quentin's estrangement from his family and the society exacerbates with his homosexual impulses. In a phallogocentric society driven by the mystique of

masculinity, Quentin unfortunately comes to realize that his sexual orientation will never find acceptance. No sooner his father discovers Quentin's homosexual inclinations, he punishes him by burning down the latter's paintings of male genitals. However, despite his father's suspicion, Quentin commits his first sexual offence against a black minor. Though detained, he remains adamantly candid declaring that "in my heart I did not plead GUILTY because I was NOT GUILTY & am not" (*Zombie* 20). Being unrepentant, he is rebuked for maligning his family's reputation. Much to Quentin's chagrin, he is taken to a psychiatrist who keeps him under observation. Treating him like a lifeless automaton, the psychiatrists forcibly try to establish his deviant nature: "*What are your dreams, Quen-tin. What are your fantasies. ... Your son Quentin is not making much progress I'm afraid. Did you know he never dreams and his posture is so poor*" (*Zombie* 14-15). Ironically, these punitive measures only enlarge Quentin's sense of victimhood and inadequacy. Significantly, Oates perspicaciously argues how social norms and state apparatuses insidiously atomize citizens and deprive them of their individualities.

Rejecting such a repressive society, Quentin seeks to assert his individuality by creating a 'zombie' that will gratify his sexual desires unconditionally. Testifying to his ruthlessness, Oates depicts how this perverse idea of zombification perpetuates the evils of racism. Metamorphosed into a dreadful racist killer, Quentin shockingly aspires:

A true ZOMBIE would be mine forever. He would obey every command & whim. Saying "Yes, Master" and "No Master." He would kneel before me lifting his eyes to me saying, "I love you, Master. There is no one but you, Master." . . .

His eyes would be open and clear but there would be nothing inside them *seeing* and nothing behind them *thinking*. Nothing *passing judgment*. . . .

A ZOMBIE would pass no judgment. . . . He would say, "You are good, Master. You are kind and merciful." . . . He would beg for his food & he would beg for oxygen to breathe. . . . He would be respectful at all times. He would never laugh or smirk or wrinkle his nose in disgust. He would lick with his tongue as bidden. He would suck his mouth as bidden. (*Zombie* 49-50)

Horribly, Quentin goes on to imagine sadistic libidinal excesses such as anally penetrating his zombie "until [it] bleed[s] blue guts" (*Zombie* 49). Entertaining such perverse fantasies, he stealthily lures his victims, often from the lower strata of the society.

As the novel unfolds, we learn that initially Quentin selects his 'specimens' from the margins of the American society. For instance, he begins kidnapping young African Americans, Asian Americans, hitch-hikers and junkies as they prove to be "safer specimen[s]. . . . [as] nobody gives a shit for" (*Zombie* 28) their absences. Conforming to his white supremacist pride, he voices his racial bias that the African Americans and the Asian Americans are biologically "retarded" (*Zombie* 46) and "monkey-like" races (*Zombie* 65) with "blood so different from [the white Americans]" (*Zombie* 65).

Derogating the ethnic others as sub-human, Quentin idiosyncratically calls them as “Frogsnot,” “Velvet Tongue,” “Bunny Gloves,” “Raisin Eyes,” “Big Guy,” and even “No Name” (*Zombie* 55-56). Disgustingly enough, his perverse desire for a zombie reeks of hideous racism. It is only when Quentin plans to kidnap “a Caucasian upper- middle-class kid,” he becomes cautious as “lots of people cared for and would miss [the white kid] at once [and] notify the police in a panic” (*Zombie* 109). No wonder, the thrill of hounding a white victim brought him a new sense of challenge.

Significantly, Quentin’s violence informed by his desire for self-empowerment typifies the practice of coercion and subjugation that plays havoc in capitalist America. Indeed, Oates’s “murderous narrator . . . signif[ies] for us a number of important tendencies and truths about contemporary American life” (Marcus 13). One such glaring truth is that of covert racism. Irrefragably, Quentin’s morbidity and indifference toward African American and Asian American citizens betray the white nation’s racial intolerance, particularly in the urban areas during the post-WW II period. The huge influx of African Americans in the cities following the abolition of the segregationist policies is thought to have unsettled the cozy lives of the whites. For instance, Quentin’s grandmother broods over the post-War social changes that allowed the “*coloreds*... to move in [and compelled the] *whites* to move out in a steady irreversible stream to [the] suburbs as Dale Springs” (*Zombie* 102). Raised in such a social climate of hatred toward the blacks, Quentin understandably experiences immense pride and satisfaction in emasculating the ethnic others. Thus, Oates insightfully maps how racism and violence intersect in the American society promising the white male false assurances of masculinity.

In a symbolic way, Quentin’s macabre experimentation with his specimens exemplifies the predatory scientific temper of the American nation. Strikingly, his techniques of lobotomy are informed by the psychosurgical procedures practiced in the 1940s and 50s. As the narrative shows, Quentin learns from a newspaper report about his father’s involvement in the Atomic Energy Commission experiments that fed “radioactive milk” (*Zombie* 171) to regenerate “mentally retarded children” (*Zombie* 171) and treated the “testicles of prisoners” with “ionizing radiation” (*Zombie* 171). Through his wild craving for a zombie and his father’s dubious involvements, Oates unmistakably uncovers the absurdities that have trampled down humanity through decades in the capitalist dispensation. Simply put, Quentin’s atrocities epitomize the antipathies characteristic of the American political structures.

The final part of the novel dramatizes Quentin’s merciless savagery stemming from his excessive narcissism. As his objective of procuring a zombie is continually deferred with the death of all ‘specimens’ during his experiments, he becomes more and more frustrated and furious. So, at last, when Quentin kidnaps a school boy crazily naming him ‘Squirrel,’ he can no longer wait to take him to his laboratory. Losing his patience, he hauls off his victim inside the van, violently penetrating him till the helpless child lapses into “a blackout” (*Zombie* 145). More brutishly, Quentin goes on banging his victim’s head till he dies and finally decides to dump the body into the river.

Oates's *Zombie* provides a sharp critique of violence inherent in a patriarchal society, showing Quentin's degeneration and the horrors attendant on it. The protagonist's vacillations vis-à-vis his self-constructed identities show only too well his horrible psychic fragmentation. With his unruffled appearance, Quentin derives perverse pleasure in beguiling naïve outsiders. He grins: "I could habit a FACE NOT KNOWN. Not known ANYWHERE IN THE WORLD. I could move in the world LIKE ANOTHER PERSON. I could arouse PITY, TRUST, SYMPATHY, WONDERMENT & AWE with such a face. I could EAT YOUR HEART & asshole you'd never know it" (*Zombie* 60). Given his diabolical mindset, Quentin could flaunt himself as the responsible "CARETAKER" (*Zombie* 50) of the university boys who stayed as tenants in his flat and also bestially revel as "TODD CUTLER" (*Zombie* 142) over his innocent victims. Withdrawn, he seeks gratification in self-conversations, jabbering and fantasizing his malicious plots. Strangely, at times Quentin avoids eye contact with others. There is no denying that his grotesque psyche stands as a most pathetic example of the crudities underlying the nation's celebration of violence and masculinity. Undoubtedly, Oates castigates the extremities of waste, abuse and decay rife in the consumerist America.

Oates's *Zombie* thus elucidates that violence can neither be redemptive for the perpetrators nor for the victimized. Ostensibly, Quentin's beastly proclivities and racial vindictiveness hound the lives of the commoners. *Zombie* questions the cultural paradigms of masculinity that in being detrimental to the entire community puts its future in doldrums. Oates interrogates the structures and assumptions of capitalism that goad individuals toward violence. To conclude, if in *Zombie*, Quentin's repressive sexuality in the face of the cherished ideals of violence triggers sadistic brutalities, then Oates more importantly, through his perniciousness captures the devastation that is the lot of the individuals and society in phallogocentric America. Undoubtedly, in so doing, Oates sounds an alarm about the social decadence resulting from America's fascination with violence and thereby denounces the escalation of violence in the American socio-political system.

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