



Violence in Selected Fiction of Oates : A Zizekian Reading

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Abstract

Oates works have been analyzed in the light of violent literature all around the world; however, they are not scrutinized on account of Žižek's outstanding ideas. Carrying out extensive research, the researcher highlights the positive outcome of Žižek's "subjective violence", "objective violence", and "systemic violence" (*Violence 2*) in Oates' *Blonde*, *Black Water* and *Rape: A love story*. This article argues that the common meaning of violence which according to *Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary* is "actions or words are intended to hurt people" is not holistically true about the violence portrayed by Oates in her fiction. She depicts that the violence can save one's life. The research presents the idea that outcome of violence can be a means of success in Oates' stories. Oates' optimistic view toward violence and positive effects of violence in the life oppressed characters are presented in this article.

The writer of this article has made an attempt to attest positive aftermath of violence and to highlight different sorts of violence in Oates' fiction by referring to aforementioned Žižek's ideas on violence. Oates has unfolded "symbolic violence", "objective violence" and "systemic violence" by illuminating violent language and terror which are held by parents, spouse or friends. Furthermore, Oates foregrounds human's capability of adapting to new situations to create new identity to cope with difficulties.

Keywords: Objective Violence, Subjective violence, Violence, Symbolic Violence

1. Introduction

The postmodern era and its immediate outcome in relativity of values has made contemporary critics such as Slavoj Žižek look at different aspects of such concepts as violence, both mentally and physically. The new inquiries of how violence is produced, maintained, experienced, and resisted have to be mapped from various positions in order to accentuate the new understandings of violence and to some extent the positive outcomes of violence, according to Žižek. Resorting to Žižek's studies of violence, the writer of this article discusses the positive way Oates characters in *Blonde*, *Black Water* and *Rape: A love story* apply, tolerate, react against or deal with violence which challenge the common negative outlooks toward them. In spite of depicting the negative consequences of violence, Oates has exposed the positive outcomes of violence mirrored in her fiction. She depicts characters who are not prejudice about their beliefs and rules and these characters are intelligent and flexible to use the violence to change the situation towards better.

The American short story writer, poet, essayist and novelist Joyce Carol Oates has been acclaimed by critics and readers alike. She has achieved myriad prizes including the National Book Award, two O. Henry Awards, and the National Humanities Medal. Oates is a pillar of American literature in the 20th century whose stirring words "portrays the tumultuous moral and social conditions and the violent upheavals that define contemporary America" (Kort227). Although a lot of critics believe that "Joyce Carol Oates's stories are frequently sources of brutal violence" (Soukup 30) Oates herself rejects these critics' ideas: "she seldom writes about happy and satisfied people because people need help with pain, never with joy. She feels she should instruct readers concerning the direction to take, in order to achieve happiness" (*Conversations* 54). Having amplitude of works of arts in print, Oates continues publishing her great works which impressively depicts violations of social agreements. She labels *Blonde*, nominated for Pulitzer Prize and the National Book Award in 2001, as "an experimental novel" (5 Cologne-Brookes) in which violence is mirrored. This novel portrays life story of Marilyn Monroe. Oates' *Black Water*, a Pulitzer Prize finalist novella is narrated by a drowning young woman who is abandoned in a car to die by a senator who saved himself but did nothing to rescue her (Loeb 57) and *Rape: A Love Story* is a novella that depicts how a police officer uses violence to save a woman's life who is the victim of rape.

As the result of Oates's portrayal of various forms of violence in her stories, most reviewers of her work have considered her a writer who often depicts the drawbacks of violence. For instance, Kathryn Van Spanckeren holds that Oates "plots are dark and often hinge on violence, which she finds to be deeply rooted in the American psyche"

(114), Sarah Buker Weissberg remarks that intending to portray the realistic conditions; Oates did not aim to shock her readers but to help us to be acquainted with those oppressed women who suffer not only physically but also mentally (2) or Brenda O. Daly states the very fact that Oates writes about the victims of violence rather than just writing about violence (226). Even those people who have a rather optimistic view toward violence in Oates' stories, such as Yuanwen Chi who in an article, "Images of women in Joyce Carol Oates's Family Trilogy," asserts that the women in her stories "have to cope with an important problem, how to survive. Their lives are complicated by the fact that they are internally obsessed with fear and insecurity" (52), have not highlighted the positive outcomes of violence portrayed in Oates' stories. There are only a few critics such as John Gardner who have noted her portrayal of "ultimately more realistic and socially engaged" (Van Spanckeren 114). The only idea which positive outcome of violence can be traceable is Kort's: Had violence and pain not been presented, one would not have felt the relief of not causing them; answered Oates being criticized for depicting too much violent crimes and suffering (227).

The present article's positive outlook towards violence calls into question the negative consequences of violence discussed by lots of critics, since its writer believes that violence cannot be defined without considering the situation in which the violent action is taken and the very fact that the word violence itself has negative connotation misleads a lot of people. Thus, by changing the point of view the positive outcomes of violence are conceivable. One of the merits of all great works of art is their openness to different interpretations and Oates' fiction does not make an exception. The first impression created by Oates' stories is a terrifying feeling generated by exposing different forms of violence, however, optimistic perspectives are also observed in them. Regarding her depiction of violence, the writer discusses that Oates gives credit to positive outcomes of violence since it brings peace in one's disturbed life or causes sort of awakening in another one's life. To present such a point, the writer draws on Žižek's "symbolic violence", "objective violence" and "systemic violence."

2. A Fresh Perspective on Violence

Like most modern-day critics who have refuted old and easy definitions, the contemporary critics who are concerned with changes in social issues such as violence do not give credence to the old definitions which implied just negative connotations. Despite the fact that many critics such as Johan Galtung and Carl G. Jacobsen just talk about the pitfalls of violence, Žižek redefines violence by categorizing it into different types such as objective or subjective violence. Žižek rebuts the normal way of defining violence which refers to a distinguishable violent originator. Generally speaking, the clear outcomes of violence are acts of crime and terror, civil unrest, international conflict. However, one should step back, to extricate him or herself from the mesmerizing enticement of directly visible 'subjective' violence, which is performed by a recognizable agent. It is essential to identify the agents which generate such view point. A step back to change the view empowers one to detect a violence that controls our efforts to react against violence and to increase one's tolerance (*Violence*1). Considering postmodern era and representation of "the Other," Žižek holds that different version of violence is needed; he asserts that "Violence against an "other" representing 'the Other' is a uniquely contemporary, cynical phenomenon, not an overall explanation of aggression" (Brockelman87).

The eruption of violence is not due to the happenings which cause problems. Žižek states: "Violence threatens to explode not when there is too much contingency in the social sphere, but when one tries to eliminate this contingency" (*The Year of Dreaming Dangerously*11). Accordingly, he holds that violent actions are not violent autonomously: "they are violent insofar as they want to put a brake on the way things are going" (*The Year of Dreaming Dangerously*82). Violence is one of Žižek's controversial ideas which is going to be studied in this thesis. Violence is categorized in three groups in Žižek's *Violence: Big Ideas // Small Books*: 1. The "subjective violence" which is "directly visible," that embodies "symbolic violence." 2. The "objective violence is invisible since it sustains the very zero-level standard against which we perceive something as subjectively violent." 3. "systemic violence" that is the outcome of economic and political disorders (2). Therefore, he emphasizes the change in one's point of view to reach a deep understanding of violence which is quite different from the common defined violence. *Violence* is commenced with the discussion about subjective violence since it is "the most visible" and familiar form. Žižek highlights subjective violence in language and in politics' and economic policies' calamitous effects upon someone's life. It is clarified that "the imposition of a certain universe meaning" is the basic consequence of violent language (1-2). Harry Van der Linden in his essay "On the Violence of Systemic Violence: A Critique of Slavoj Žižek", clarifies Žižek's subjective violence as the "most basic form involves that its agents generate physical force through their own body (stabbing, hitting, etc.), or an immediate extension of their bodies (shooting), and this physical force then strikes the victim" (13). To clarify objective violence Žižek holds that "subjective violence is experienced as such against the background of a non-violent zero level. ... Objective violence is invisible since it sustains the very zero-level standard against which we perceive something as subjectively violent" (*Violence*2). The systemic violence is "the violence inherent in a system: not only direct physical violence, but also the more subtle forms of coercion that sustain relations of domination and exploitation, including the threat of violence" (*Violence*9).

Žižek elucidates manifestation of a new world out of violence in his *Living in the End Times*; pertinently, he states that "the system which emerged through violence should repay its debt in order to regain an ethico-ecological balance" (35). Interestingly, Žižek goes beyond the emergence of a new world and talks about the appearance of a new identity: "all different forms of traumatic encounter, independently of their specific nature (social, natural, biological, symbolic), lead to the same result — a new subject emerges which survives its own death, the death (or erasure) of its symbolic identity" (*Living in the End Times* 294).

3. Violence in Oates Stories

The writer inquires into how Oates recontextualize key concepts such as violence in her stories. This inquiry needs dealing with discrepancies between the old definitions of violence and the new ones which are suggested by contemporary critics. Some critics such as Mary Kathryn Grant believe that “From violence, in Oates’ world, there is no escaping. Continuously, her fiction searches out and exposes the very root of violence: a sense of personal impotence” (32). Pessimistic commentators usually ignore the contemporary definitions; consequently most critics speak about negative aspects of violence, power and law in such violent fictions as that of Oates. On the other hand there are some critics who are not very pessimist about Oates view towards the world such as Dorota Horvathova who emphasizes the very fact that “Oates literary vision articulates an individual way to transcend situations” (239). This essay focuses on Oates positive attitude toward definitions of violence and power, since they play a leading role in the lives of oppressed characters. Thus, the mutability of violence releases Oates’ oppressed characters from depressive disorders or anxiety.

Having in mind Žižek’s new definitions of violence, we observe various cases of surprising outcomes of violence in Oates’ fiction. In *Black Water*, Oates mirrors the subjective violence that a political man can take violence in order to save his own life: “he’d kicked her convulsive himself in terror to escape.” (174) To portray the senator’s violent attempt to save just his own life, Oates mentions: “This person, this man, his weight thrown on top of her—she’d forgotten who it was. He too clawing and clutching and scrambling and kicking frantic to get out of the capsized car” (93). He has kicked the girl who has been his companion to find a way out of the car. Subjective violence which is very clear but in this situation it has been hidden under the dark water. Considering what Žižek has mentioned about mutation of point of view will reveal that if he had not used the girl to save his own life, possibly they both have been dead in this accident but he managed to save his own life which is well worth it.

According to Christine Atkins, in Oates’s female coming-of-age stories a violent fantasy, such as rape, functions as rite of passage for girls and women in the process of attaining growth and agency. (436) Oates has portrayed this idea through Bethie: “YOU WERE BETHEL MAGUIRE everybody called Bethie. Your childhood ended when you were twelve years old” (48). To emphasize the very fact that rape led to sort of growth, Oates repeats this idea in different parts of story: “That time of your childhood before you and your mother became victims was gone forever” (109) or “For childhood belonged to *before*, now you had come to live in *after*” (92). In another part of the story Bethie says: “Childhood was over and yet: as long as your mother could not remember what had happened to her you could behave in the old way of *before*” (117). Furthermore, Oates compare the night in which the gang rape happened to a vigil: “The vigil at St. Mary’s. The end of your childhood” (129). Holding an all-night vigil was bitter but resulted in sort of growth.

Oates represents the very fact that too much violence which is taken against somebody can make him or her feel lucky: “Though one day Teena Maguire would curse the fact that she’d been kept alive, five days on a respirator and attached to IV tubes in intensive care at St. Mary’s, had not been put out of her misery with a bullet to the brain there on the boathouse floor, fucking bad luck she’d ever been born” (*Rape* 93). Oates refers to the fact that everyone in Teena’s situation would wish to be dead or to be killed; death in this situation would be sort of blessing. To picture another positive outcome of death Oates mirrors the fact that “since DeLucca’s death, and since the Pick brothers had vanished” (293) Teena was feeling better. Generally speaking, death of a human being should make one sad but in this story it has been helpful. That is the surprising aspect of violence.

Surprisingly, Oates regards violence as a remedy: “On the filthy floor near the front entrance, the gang-rape victim would almost die. It would be speculated that she’d been left to die. If her rapists had been thinking, not so drunk, or so drugged, not so excited, they’d have made sure she was dead. And her twelve-year-old daughter who’d crawled behind the stacked boats to hide” (*Rape* 62). It seems that the author believes that it was better to make sure the raped woman and her daughter were dead rather leave them to suffer the life afterwards. The unexpected aspect of violence that can release one from suffering the life full of shame and pain is considerable. Oates remarks: “I feel my own place is to dramatise the nightmares of my times and to show how some individuals find a way out – awake, come alive, on the future” (qtd. in Shantarahm 2). Oates portrays violence; however, she believes that there is always a remedy hidden there to survive.

Norma Jeane is another character in Oates’ fiction whose life is portrayed to reflect some hidden remedies to survive. Bucky, Norma’s first husband, violated his wife’s life by leaving her alone and going to war. Astonishingly, Oates has portrayed the very fact that going to war is an excuse to get rid of his wife, Norma Jean, who was “so needy” (167). Bucky complained to his parents about Norma; he explains that: “I’m upset. When I go home, there Norma Jeane is. Like she’s been cleaning house and making supper all day long waiting for me to come home. Like without me she doesn’t exist. Like I’m God or something.” He paused in his pacing, breathing hard; ..., he said, “I don’t want to be God, I’m just Bucky Glazer” (168). Moreover, Bucky did not pay attention to Norma Jean’s feelings who told her husband: “No, Daddy! You can’t leave me. I’ll die if you leave me” (174). However, she managed to find a job and rent a room for herself. She noted that “I’m nobody’s daughter now. I’m through with that” (178). Norma Jeane decided to live independently: “She didn’t move in with the Glazers in Mission Hills. She didn’t remain in Verdugo Gardens. The week following Bucky’s departure on the Liberty she got an assembly-line job at Radio Plane Aircraft fifteen miles to the east in Burbank. She rented a furnished room in a boardinghouse near the trolley line and she was living alone by the time of her eighteenth birthday” (178). Oates mirrors that living alone with strangers was hard for Norma Jeane but “She was free! She was alone! For the first time in her life truly alone. Not an orphan. Not a foster child. Not a

daughter, or a daughter-in-law, or a wife" (180). The positive outcome of her husband's departure is that she has found her own identity, she feels free which is an essential feeling for living happily.

Oates presents the positive effect of war on Norma Jeane's life:

Amid a thunderous clatter of machinery at the aircraft factory beginning then to tell herself the story of why she'd become engaged at fifteen and dropped out of high school to marry at sixteen. And why in terror and exhilaration she was now living by herself for the first time in her life at eighteen, perceiving that her life would only now begin. And this she knew to be because of the War. (179)

Norma Jeane believes that her life has just started and now she is living independently and that is as a result of war. Pertinently, Horvathova mentions that "Oates's fiction queries the idea of success, and at what cost it is attained. Many of Oates's characters seek to be reborn, to establish their own identities and despite the pain involved, wish to maintain optimistically their share of luck" (239). Moreover, Oates mentions: "Norma Jeane liked the War. The War was as steady and reliable as hunger or sleep. Always, the War was there. You could talk about the War with any stranger The War was a dream dreamt by everyone. You could never be lonely during the War. Since December 7, 1941 ... for years there would be no loneliness" (182). War has solved one mental problem. No one is feeling isolated, "News was either good or bad. You would immediately rejoice with another person, or you would be saddened or upset with another person. Strangers wept together. Everyone listened. Everyone had an opinion". (182) The pleasant feeling of being united with other people in understanding is the positive outcome of war according to Oates; furthermore, her idea corresponds with Žižek's idea who believes that violence can be useful and helpful.

To emphasize the importance of changing the point of view to define a concept Oates refers to a photographer, Otto, who hated his female models. While Otto was taking photos of Norma she talked disdainfully about her beautiful body: "he hated his girl models. He hated their naked-fish bodies, their anxious hopeful eyes. If you could tape over the eyes. Tape the mouths in such a way that, though exposed, the mouths couldn't speak" (231). However, "There was comfort in the photographer's contempt" (231). She was reassured to feel Otto's hatred toward herself. Moreover, the "nude photo scandal" which was sort of subjective violence had a positive consequence: "The Studio ("after I sucked all their cocks one by one around the table") forgave her for the nude photo scandal and raised her salary to \$ 1, 000 a week plus incidental expenses" (311). In addition, it was not only useful for Norma Jean but also for her mother as well: "Immediately, Norma Jeane made arrangements to transfer Gladys Mortensen from Norwalk to a much smaller private mental hospital in Lakewood" (311). Gladys is going to experience a better life.

In a party "in celebration of the Hollywood Heroes" Norma Jeane reaches an incredible sense of relief through violence of filmmakers: "Norma Jeane hadn't known beforehand. She hadn't known that Mr. Z, Mr. D, Mr. S, and others would be there. Smiling at her with angry hyena teeth" (311) and then they enclosed her as she had predicted "like hyena circling" (311). They made Mr. V, with whom Norma Jeane was in love, hate her: "As V looked on from a short distance the men touched Norma Jeane, drew their sausage fingers over her, bare shoulders, bare arms, breasts, hips, and belly, they leaned close and laughed softly together, with a wink in V's direction. We've had this one. This one, we've all had. When Norma Jeane pushed free of them and turned to V, he was gone" (311), and soon afterwards she believed that there was "so much energy now that V was out of her life. Now that a cruel false hope was out of her life" (324). Balčiūnaitė notes that:

The scenes of violence against women (and men) that occur in almost every novel are often related to economic deterioration and uncontrollable passions. One can thus deduce that in Oates's view, the combination of upward mobility and spiritual development can function not only to improve women's economic conditions, but also play a character-shaping and liberating role in women's lives. (210)

Norma Jeane's "economic deterioration and uncontrollable passion" played important roles in guiding her toward success.

Accordingly Kirubahar mentions that "Oates continually exploits these two fold aspects of violence: the ability to destroy the enemy(ies), and the ability to transcend the trivial. She also insists on the ability of violence to help the individual achieve a sense of identity and wholeness" (114). Furthermore, Horvathova notes that Oates's aspirational characters desire a new identity in which they re-invent themselves. The act of re-birth is portrayed by distinctive symbols of awakening into a new identity" (233). Norma Jeane changes her identity and becomes a famous actress Marilyn to make a new life. This rebirth of identity was impossible without the objective or subjective violence.

4. Conclusion

Illustrating "symbolic violence", "objective violence" and "systemic violence" through various events either social or personal, Oates presents a new perspective on violence as positive. In this regard, violence has created new situations and new identities which have improved the life of a person. Oates highlights the mutability of definitions of concepts such as violence by demonstrating different forms of violence and invites her readers to alter the cliché point of view as negative with a new one: violence as a life saver.

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