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[Anthropology Course]

Oppression by Governments and Societies

Both violent corrupt governments and extremely patriarchal society practices oppress a country's citizens as explored in Marjorie Agosín's "So We Will Not Forget: Literature and Human Rights in Latin America" and Roger Lancaster's *Life is Hard*. Agosín uses testimonial literature to draw attention to the oppression of 1970s' Argentine government. Meanwhile, Lancaster writes about "machismo," a Latin American societal ideal of extreme patriarchy, and the effects of its oppressive practices on men, women, and children of Erasmus Jiménez, a working class Nicaraguan neighborhood (Lancaster 1992: 16). A central theme in both readings is oppression, which can take the form of government-organized disappearances or societal-pressured acts of machismo, yet the oppressed find ways to rebel against these oppressive practices.

Through descriptions of various Latin American writers' portrayals of the torture and disappearances done by the corrupt Argentine governments of the 1970s, Agosín demonstrates that these violent practices oppressed Argentines. For example, Agosín condemns torture with the example of Argentine writer Elvira Orphee's *The Angel's Last Conquest*. By Orphee writing from the point of view of the torture, Agosín explains, "The banality of evil and its widespread infusion into society frightens the reader as he or she is made aware of the varying degrees of torture techniques that can be used to punish subversive acts…" (1996: 67). The graphic descriptions of torture told from the point of view of the torturer in this book makes the Argentine torture more real for readers because it puts them in the torture room. This is an

effective method of portraying the government as evil because "The novel leaves the reader without any doubt that torture is the state's main method for maintaining order" (Agosín 1996: 67). Government-organized disappearances are another oppressive government practice that Agosín condemns because disappearances violate several human rights including the right to freedom, the right to physical integrity, the right to legal defense, and the right to life (1996: 70). She supports this argument with examples of disappeared Argentines who survived and wrote of their experiences. One example is Argentine journalist Jacobo Timmerman who was disappeared from 1976 to 1979, but "It is important to remember that Timmerman was saved primarily because he was a public figure" (Agosín 1996: 70). Thousands of disappeared people have never been found. Upon Timmerman's release, he wrote about his experiences in a series of flashbacks to his small cell. Agosín uses the passion in testimonial literature to demonstrate the evil oppression of the Argentine government of the 1970s.

It is quite difficult to rebel against a violently oppressive state as evidenced by Agosín's few examples of rebellion, but examples of people triumphing against the oppressive government exist. One example is *Coral de Guerra* in which the tortured one refuses to speak during the torture seen. Agosín explains its significance, "The self-imposed silence is a triumph for the victim and, in her silence, the undefeatable resistance of the victim is profiled and established" (1996: 69). Speaking would be admitting defeat and subversion to the torturous government; therefore, refusing to speak is a victory for the Argentines against the corrupt military government's violent practice. Presenting torture as evil and unjustified in testimonial literature is an effective persuasive strategy because it reminds readers of the horrors that happened in oppressive Argentina in the 20th century, so history will not repeat itself.

While the people of Erasmus Jiménez were not tortured or disappeared by the Nicaraguan government, society's ideal of machismo is an equally concerning practice because it pressures men into a destructive behavior that oppresses women and other men because it requires men to dominate both women and men. According to machismo, men dominate women through having children with them and domestic violence (Lancaster 1992: 34). An effect of machismo's emphasis on domination is men go to great lengths to provide for their families. Rolando, Flora's husband, works in the United States to earn more stable American dollars and buy cheaper appliances to send home to Nicaragua (Lancaster 1992: 112). This is an example of machismo because men can dominate women economically by being a strong source of income for the woman's household. A popular belief is that the money supporting an apparent female-run Erasmus Jiménez household comes from a man working in the United States (Lancaster 1992: 161). This belief oppresses women's economic potential to provide for herself and family. In contrast to this idea of oppressive machismo is the Nicaraguan belief that women have bewitching power over men. Men seem resentful of this alleged power, or perhaps oppression, and Lancaster gives possible reasons for this, "projection of their own hostility onto women; their fear of resentful women; a collective guilty conscience over men's treatment of their wives; or a factual acknowledgment of women's secret reserve of occult power, obscure practices, pitted against men's more visible power" (1992: 175). Perhaps in an effort to disprove women's bewitching power over men, machismo asks men to dominate women by taking many women, supporting them, and beating them.

Machismo dictates that men must also dominate other men be it through drink, desmoche, number of lovers, or physical strength. Desmoche is a machista card game that Lancaster compares to American poker because it is a man's game about risk-taking. Lancaster

describes its machista characteristics "taking risk, displaying bravado in the face of danger" are "the essence of machismo's ideal of manhood" (1992: 195). A man wins desmoche by taking more risks and showing more bravado than his opponents; thus, he dominates the other men. If taking risks makes one a man, then being risk-averse detracts from one's manhood. Men can also dominate other men, according to machismo, sexually. This can be from having the most female lovers or being the active participant in a homosexual relationship; either demonstrates their masculinity. In machismo, a man does not lose any masculinity by sleeping with other men, as long as he is the active participant; therefore, the "cochones," or passive participants, are a necessary product of machismo to keep everyone in their place (Lancaster 1992: 237). Teaching machismo begins in infantry. Young boys are socialized to be tough and are chastised if they do anything that could be seen as not masculine. For example, Lancaster describes a scene in which adults hold an infant boy and girl and control the babies' hands in an imaginary fight. The baby boy hits the girl, and both infants cry. The baby girl is consoled, but the baby boy is called a "cochón;" therefore, "they are teaching him to beat women" (Lancaster 1992: 41). When society teaches boys that only aggressive behavior is acceptable through machismo, this oppressive behavior inevitably perpetuates. The emphasis of dominance is oppressive because it limits what a man can do in society as a masculine man.

Lancaster's ethnography shows that not all men are machistas and women can stand up to men, both of which are acts of rebellion against oppressive machismo. One example is the lack of legally married couples in Erasmus Jiménez. Women prefer to remain unwed because "in a legal marriage the husband would be at greater liberty to beat his wife in the event of disagreements, for she would have fewer retaliatory options" (Lancaster 1992: 46). It is to the women's advantage to remain unmarried because it is easier for her to leave her abusive partner.

Violence against women is an acceptable machismo practice, but not all Nicaraguan women living with machista husbands are at risk for domestic violence. For example, when Lancaster asked Flora, a woman in Erasmus Jiménez, if her husband had ever beat her, she laughed in response and replied, "That he should try such a thing with me!" (Lancaster 1992: 120). This shows that not all women accept this machismo practice, which is another act of rebellion against the oppressive machismo society. Sometimes men have non-machista tendencies. For example, when Rolando, Flora's husband, left his family to work in the United States, he initially wrote often about his homesickness (Lancaster 1992: 112). Writing letters depended on Flora replying to them; thus, it is a dependent action, which is not machista. Like government-supported oppression, it is difficult to rebel against society's oppressive ideals for the people of Erasmus Jiménez to stand against machismo's oppressions, but it happens.

Whether the government or society is repressing human rights, oppression by the dominant group onto the subordinate group occurred in 20th century Latin America. The dominant group here is the corrupt government torturing and disappearing its citizens or the societal ideal of machismo forcing men to dominate women and other men in society to demonstrate their masculinity. On the other hand, the subordinate group includes the tortured and disappeared citizens of Argentina and the dominated men and women of Erasmus Jiménez. Government oppression may appear worse because its practices include torture and disappearances, and because it requires a corrupt government, it is difficult for citizens to rebel. However, the oppression on what is seen as the weaker group in a society from a societal ideal, machismo, is equally oppressive and difficult for citizens to rebel. Even though rebellion against oppression is not easy, both Agosín and Lancaster provide examples of successful rebellion against both an oppressive government and society in their writing.

Works Cited

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