Student

Course

Instructor

Date

13th Film Analysis

Ava Du Vernay’s extremely powerful documentary named as ‘13th’ introduced the world to the thirteenth amendment in the constitution of United States. It stated that;

Neither slavery nor involuntary servitude, except as a punishment for crime whereof the party shall have been duly convicted, shall exist within the United States, or any place subject to their jurisdiction.

This amendment argues that albeit slavery was apparently abolished in 1865, this particular clause of the amendment legally inculcated a malicious form of slavery in to American institutions. This specific loophole has since then been considered as a shattering political tool in the terms of mass incarceration and other processes of criminalization. 13th is basically a comprehensive historical survey that establishes strong links between old age slavery to the present day’s prison industrial complex. This film has given the opportunity for the plot to unpack that loophole that how amendment was made a tool for exploitation right after the Civil War. It depicted how African Americans were subject to imprisonment on a mass level just for extremely minor kinds of crimes. It was substantially done in order to guarantee that the economic system flourishing due to the free labor in the South could still remain intact. Traditionally, this new era has also been affected by the sight of beginning of what it should be termed as ‘mythology of black criminality’. It is unfortunate that this concept still persist in our society and we have not been able to fully understand it or make any efforts to end it once and for all.

 The film has traced back some century and a half old history of race, the phenomenon of incarceration and disempowerment of the communities that were not quite dominant in the United States. As the Jim Crow Era and the Civil Rights Movement came to an end, the United States went through the termination of legal segregation in its institutions and the inculcation of the Voting Rights Act in the constitution. However, it was not expected what followed along with this change in the system. It caused a surreptitious turn of events to erupt in the form of a new racial control policy. The system that was full of open ended violence and discrimination was horrendously replaced by the racially coded pomposity under the name of law and order and the war on crime. This film exposes the Southern Strategy of Nixon as an attempt to quietly veil off the ideology by decimating the black people while appealing to the white voters (CJPC). In particular, the war on drug was a specified attempt to target only the people of color as it could be easily seen by the difference in the categories of the sentencing for dealing the crack and powdered cocaine. These things were highly concentrated in the poor, black urban communities in the society.

 It became the significant political strategy to score winning records in the State by being extremely ‘tough on crime’ while this concept was propagated by the racially based fears that the black Americans were the super predators. It has been established that both the political domains, Republicans and Democrats were liable for the adoption of such legislation. The crime bill stated that financial incentives would be provided for the expansion of the prisons and filling them in with black people. These absurd laws compelled millions of people to be incarcerated, who could have easily been living their lives like they were supposed to. However, these laws broke apart thousands of families while vanishing an entire generation of black males. Black Americans have been the subject of brutality and violence throughout the film and numerous statistical numbers were even more shocking for the audience.

 13th takes us along to the present day social system by highlighting the events of police brutality against several individuals including Michael Brown, Sandra Bland, Jordan Davis and many more. It scrutinizes the disturbing prison industrial complex and the economically driven bonds between the corporations and the lawmakers (Mock). It has also highlighted the increasing indignation over the institutionalized racism and the intensification of the movement ‘Black Lives Matter’ as a comeback to the years of violence and impunity at the hands of the state. This phenomenon can be backed by the statistics that the United States has imprisoned over 25% of the incarcerated population of the world. It has also been stated that around one in every three Black men are expected to live lifetimes or a major part of their lives in the prisons. It can be seen today as the population of prisoners in the United States have increased multifold over the years. Today, more Black men are imprisoned than they were enslaved in the 1850s (Browning et al.). It can be argued if a new wave of slavery is underway, yet not in the traditional way, to highlight the White supremacy.

 This film has anatomized the racial and the capitalist underpinning of this era of mass incarceration such a way that the 13th amendment can be considered as an ineradicable act of our social and political inquiries. DuVernay has made it clear by connecting all the links in the history to disclose a series of events that got United States in its current position. The psychodynamics and the economic logistics of the slavery never really left the society. However, these evils went underground while mutating and adopting different forms to reappear (White). The Catholic social themes that were the underpinning of this film were the ‘Dignity of the Person’, ‘Solidarity’ and ‘Respect for Life’. The criminal theory that can be best applied on the film are the critical, labelling and conflict theory. In the critical theory of crime, select few of the society define the crime and the punishments while the criminals involved in it do not agree on the laws. It is basically the product of oppression, racism and class division. The labelling theory is the stereotyping of particular individuals with any crime and is primarily dependent on labelling the minorities. Such a negative label on an entire race can affect their self-concept and identities. The conflict theory, on the other hand, states that the crimes within any society arise due to conflicts and disparities of the social and economic system (Muzzatti and Smith). The standards are set by the elite and standardizations are made for the rest of the classes.

 This film has challenged us to move beyond the simple ideas of bringing about reforms that can only reshape a system full of oppression that has been among us in several forms since the Civil War had ended. Its objective was calling out for the humanization, to label the mass incarceration as a thoughtful moral crisis. It is imperative to change the views by which United States has defined the concept of human dignity. It is also a call for all people to take a profound stand to fight against the racial injustice. The film ends at some haunting words that leaves us a question to ponder upon;

People say all the time, I don’t understand how people could have tolerated slavery, how could they have made peace with that? How could people have gone to a lynching and participated in that? How did people make sense of this segregation, this 'white' and 'colored only' drinking—that’s so crazy—I just—if I was living at that time, I would have never tolerated anything like that!

**Works Cited**

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