Your Name

Instructor Name

Course Number

Date

Title: Analyzing Stories

Claudia Rankine is a poet and an essayist. She is famous for her novel, Citizen: An American Lyric. This novel was published on October 2014. Her novel was a tribute to Martin who was shot dead by George Zimmerman without any reason just because he was African Black. Her novel provides the reader with an insight into the problems faced by the African-American community. To describe all the insults and discrimination Black people face daily she used the word micro-aggression. Being a member of the African-American community Rankine refuses to remain silent about the mistreatments each colored individual face. Her novel citizen is a clear example of how fierce she is in expressing her thoughts in this stereotypical society.

Rankine’s novel helps the reader in understanding different vulnerabilities, and pain that occurs in the everyday life of a colored person. Her words serve as a catalyst for the people who suffered a lot like writers, women and other people from the black community, to raise voice against racism and discrimination while incorporating their real-life experiences of citizenship in comparison with “white individuals”.

Rankine in her novel took a very stylistic approach that directly appeals tragedy, and piteousness in multiple ways by using certain images that are disturbing in order to get the reader’s attention emotionally, and visually towards the issue. She aims to point out the grey area that is remained unaddressed although the whole concept of racism revolves around this grey area. Typically, we all are aware of this grey area as it lies in our subconscious mind but still deny to accept it. Rankine took advantage of this by playing on the parts in which the reader is not aware of the grey area while mentioning all obvious facts about the grey area that reader knows (Hersi). Rankine plays with readers’ subconscious mind by forcing them to address their emotions by putting them directly in the situation using the micro-aggressions. She describes the grey area as an area that consists of black and white people. This helped critics, writers, and readers to think about the larger picture of the issues and explore racism. Claudia's novel addressed bio-political issues and environmental injustice. She used the term “othered” in context to white society and how it influenced negatively to the Black people. She discussed that most of the white people are privileged and lives in the main of the city with having less exposure of pollutant and toxins while black people live in the outskirts of the city thereby exposed to all the toxins (Hersi). Furthermore, she used the term “wasting” of the body that helps in understanding the health issues including both mentally and physically that the African American community face on a daily basis. Being “othered” in every field of life negatively impacts the health of the black people as they had to fight this racism and inequality every day. Her writing in citizens is crafted carefully with each word bearing a considerable amount of weight even the title she used means a lot like the word “citizen” itself explains the irony. An irony that Rankine is fully aware of as being a part of the African American community she knows what it takes to survive in all the criticism and discrimination.

The word “citizen” is defined as an inhabitant of any specific town or city or a place where a person is born and possess basic rights. However, white people mostly are the ones that possess these basic rights while the black community is considered merely an inhabitant. Considering Martin’s case in which the whole novel is based, he may have been given a benefit of doubt if he had been white and would be alive today yet he was shot brutally just because his skin was not light at the age seventeen. The contrasting aspect of the word citizen is beautifully presented by Claudia as she considers Martin just an inhabitant who had no access to the rights that a legal citizen has that is white people as they are more privileged in any field of life.

Moving on towards the term racism, it can be described as discrimination against someone because of their ethnicity and color by perceiving one own self as superior. Racism is a very vast term and therefore it affects everyone differently. Rankine uses a combination of various writing styles to explain to the reader about this issue. In order to grasp reader attention her opening lines were simple like on her novel’s very first page the first line was “When you are alone and too tired even to turn on any of your devices, you let yourself linger in a past stacked among your pillows”. In this simple yet complex sentence, she immediately grasps the reader’s attention. She tried to connect with the reader by using a phrase like “when you are too tired” yet making them think about their past and present as well. Due to her choice of words at first glance, any reader would be “wrong-footed”. She carefully puts the reader in a position that they have experienced already. While closely examining Claudia’s words it can be seen that she wanted the reader to assure that, “it’s not just you stacked among your pillows” but it’s your past. This makes the reader start making connections of their experiences and every page of the novel.

Due to Rankine’s ability to camouflage a complex sentence to appear simple helps the reader in understanding her perspective. She also used images to further provide clarity so that the reader understands her ideas. For instance, at one point in the novel, she mentioned about her experience with the therapist. She was in contact with her therapist but they both have never seen each other before. So when they both met the therapist was a bit confused as she sees an African American in her office. She reacted as if the writer (Claudia) was some vermin on her property who had been warned before to “Get away from [her] house” (Rankine 18). This whole scenario was followed by an image of a wounded animal with a human face instead of its own face named as “little girl”. At first, the reader might think about the purpose of this image being used in this tense scenario and will be “wrong-footed” even in the second attempt but while analyzing the image in depth the readers would be able to draw conclusion. As animals do not possess the ability to speak and children also in their early childhood tend to struggle in using words to express themselves so in the particular situation mentioned above a grown woman of different race also needs validation from others. At this point, Rankine without camouflaging her words openly explained the reader about the biasedness’ of society towards black people just because of the color of their skin. Here again, Rankine is successful in slipping the idea of grey area in the readers’ sub-consciousness (Adams).

Rankine’s basic purpose was not only to highlight the issues that the African American community face but to educate the reader as well by addressing the problems in our society. As the novel proceeds, Rankine used more images that are disturbing and ambiguous yet meaningful to depicts and express her mixed feelings like sadness and anger. Another example of the images she used in her text is an image of a white wall with words that were repeated again and again. These words were “I Feel Most Colored When I Am Thrown Against a Sharp White Background” over and over again (Rankine 53). This particular image is of great importance although it is untitled yet it still is very powerful in conveying a message. Rankine used the image to explain that everyone has a certain tolerance level more specifically the black community who faced all the discrimination on daily basis has reached the point where they are tired of being neglected and being bullied. The image also sheds light on the issues colored community face. The repetition of words in the image is paradox of being seen and not being seen. The words like “seen” in the image mean invisible and overly visible. In context to the novel, these words on the image explain that most of the time the black community is neglected and are not given their basic rights as a citizen yet they are overly visible when it comes to violence, discrimination, and racism.

To convey her message and feelings Rankine does not need to be blunt although at some times she was direct about some issues yet still her silent assertions speak itself. This analysis is evident as in her novel she mentioned three dates with one line. They were “November 23, 2012, / In Memory of Jordan Russell Davis”, “February 15, 2014, / The Justice System”, “August 9, 2014, / In Memory of Michael Brown”. In these three lines, she summed up her entire novel. As her novel was a tribute to Trayvon Martin's case in which a seventeen-year-old “black” boy was shot dead by a neighborhood watchman who was a volunteer although the boy was unarmed. Rankine also used an image of a torn hoodie. This image is overwhelming as it depicts tension, anger, and sadness at the same time. In the second line Rankine directly pointed out the failure of the justice system and the failure of all the amendments to correct the system. She used her poetic abilities as well as her excellent writing skills to spread her message and awareness about the problems in the current justice system and how black people are living a miserable life. She succeeded in conveying her frustration, anger, and sadness to the reader while providing an in-depth understanding of inequalities between different races prevailing in society.

Works cited

Adams, Bella. "Black Lives/White Backgrounds: Claudia Rankine’s Citizen: An American Lyric and Critical Race Theory." *Comparative American Studies An International Journal* 15.1-2 (2017): 54-71.

Hersi, Asli. *Rethinking Racism in Claudia Rankine's Citizen: An American Lyric*. MS thesis. University of Stavanger, Norway, 2016.

Rankine, Claudia. *Citizen: an American lyric*. Graywolf Press, 2014.