

Civil disobedience and civil rights literature review

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Introduction

Thoreau's civil disobedience emerges from Thoreau's refusal to pay church tax claiming that the church has no right to impose tax. His reasoning is that if all institutions were to present their tax bills to the government, then he would be bound to pay his; but, there is no justification for "taxing the schoolmaster to support the priest" (Thoreau 49). This implies that though the policy may be ethical, the underlying structure is disputable. His reasoning is influential; it stirs a logical query of every aspect of one's own life, indicating a close connection between text and action. The list of the readers influenced by Thoreau's thoughts is astonishing; famous leaders from Gandhi to Mandela, the fight against apartheid, the Civil Rights Movement and more recently the Egyptian revolution (Long Walk Home). Similar reasoning and influence is seen in the film, '1m, The Long Walk Home' by Odessa and Mirriam. The plot of this film is based on the racial inequality, in particular, the 1955-1956 Montgomery Bus Boycott. In the film, Odessa is confronted with common problems facing African American

families in the South during this era: segregation, racial discrimination, poverty and violent attacks from the whites. The long walk home alludes to the long walk Odessa took to and from work each day as a protest to racial discrimination (The Long Walk Home). In the film, the African-American community had begun a widespread boycott of public transport system, rising tensions in the city and massive financial losses to city's exchequer. Thoreau's influence seems to lead to collective campaigns and resistance movements much like in the film (Berg 85). This essay analyses the background of Thoreau's writings, the influence of his thoughts on action and how this is reflected in the film.

Background of Thoreau's Action

In *Civil Disobedience*, Thoreau questions the church's right to impose tax on citizens. He argues that the schoolmaster, the church and the lyceum all have a right to remit their tax-bills. His thoughts are largely revolutionary; he disputes the policies and wants a change of practice. It is worth noting that Thoreau though he does not object the taxation policy, he agitates for a change of the practice (Long Walk Home). The facts behind Thoreau's refusal to pay church tax are: in 1839, Thoreau is included in the Concord tax records; but, in 1840, he refuses to pay tax and someone pays his tax dues, after which he requests that his name be struck out of the tax rolls. The church grants him his request. However, again in 1846, Thoreau is arrested for failing to pay poll tax. Maria Thoreau pays them on his behalf and Thoreau is released (Thoreau 15).

Thoreau explains the rationale for his actions. He writes that if all institutions would present their tax returns, he will be at ease to pay up his. This act of

resistance is not based on a plea of poverty; but, it is founded on the tendency to associate together for a common good (Colombo, Robert, and Bonnie 109). He goes against the mainstream practice by defying a practice religiously followed by the majority. The precedents for Thoreau's actions are evident in the actions of influential leaders like Mohandas Gandhi and Nelson Mandela, who refused to cooperate with potentially exploitative and unscrupulous practices of the state. Gandhi, clearly influenced by Thoreau's thoughts, staged a local protest in a spiritual and political movement against the authorities. The scenarios depict a struggle between the majority vs. the minority groups (Thoreau 57), where individual takes a leftist approach to advocate for the rights of the often marginalized minority. These influential leaders, the fight against Apartheid as well as the recent Egyptian demonstrations all have one thing in common: the objection to destructive practices of the authority (Berg 96).

Moreover, the actions are widespread and resonate with many people. Thoreau remarks " let your life be a counter friction to stop the machine. What I have to see, at any rate, that I do not lend myself to the wrong which I condemn" (292). He also claims that resistance to state laws is justified if the citizens perceive the law as being unjust. His opinion reflects a subtle call for mass action, informed by conscience. Thoreau's statements have an influence on readers; they represent a call to action against destructive principles of the state. The same thoughts are seen in the plot of the film, ' 1m, The Long Walk Home'.

The Long Walk Home

The ' Long Walk Home' basically proclaims that achieving racial equality is no mean feat; it requires a strong commitment to social change. The film, which was set in Montgomery, Alabama, the actual place for the 1955 Montgomery Bus Boycott by the African American community (Berg 87), provides important insights into racism and the struggle for justice in the early decades of the 20th century America. In the film, the black community decided to boycott the city's public transport, the buses, because they were forced to take the back seats. Odessa, a young black woman and her husband together with their children attend a church service, where they are inspired by their friends' resolve to boycott the city's buses (Thoreau 87). During the boycott, Miriam offers to pick Odessa to and from work twice a week. As the situation escalated to violence, and affects many people including Odessa's daughter and son. At one point, Miriam overhears her husband making racist remarks about the boycott. Her husband on learning that Miriam has been picking Odessa to work, he immediately orders her to stop (Long Walk Home). However, she defies his and drives to the car pool headquarters to show solidarity with Odessa and other African Americans. Colombo, Cullen and Lisle, note that " history shows us how completely our gender derives from cultural myths about what is proper for men and women to think, enjoy, and do" (403). Modern gender identities and roles are often shaped by cultural beliefs. The authors further contend that underlying " cultural myths of gender influence human development and personal identity" (404). In other words, the myth of gender means that manhood is authority and dominance. This is reflected by Miriam's husband who orders

her to stop driving Odessa without consulting her first. Nevertheless, Miriam and Odessa's actions transcend racial barriers, particularly segregation. While Odessa's stand is based on morals resulting from her involvement in religious activities of the black community, Miriam's stand is based on her inner voice, her conscience to do what is right. Similarities can be drawn from Thoreau's essay; Thoreau explains why he chose not to pay church tax, "I did not see why the lyceum should not present its tax-bill, and have the State to back its demand" (79). His moral standpoint leads to his actions to refuse to pay church tax. He even makes it clear that civil disobedience must not be based on opposition of the government by industry but rather on struggle between the government and conscience (Thoreau 118). He argues that if a country is run by unjust men, it imperative that 'honest' men rebel and stage a revolution to rid the country of the 'evil system'.

With regard to the film, it is the injustices meted out on the blacks riding on the Montgomery buses that make the system destructive not the operations of the city's transportation system (Berg 89). Thus, the black boycotters' goals were; to eliminate discourteous treatment by bus owners, Negroes to operate the buses plying routes with majority black inhabitants and non-discrimination of blacks with regard to seats in the buses (Long Walk Home). Similarly, Thoreau's goals for his actions, though grander by comparison, were to bring about widespread social changes. In Rereading America, the authors argue that social pressure forces people to unite into groups for a common goal. It makes people to "think critically, challenging the cultural myths" (Colombo, Robert, and Bonnie 57), either consciously or subconsciously. In the film, Odessa and Miriam's actions challenge the norms

of gender, segregation and racism that had taken root then. Also, Thoreau's action is a masculine action. This is evident in his remarks; he explicitly likens the State with a "timid lone woman with her silver spoons" (Thoreau 127). Furthermore, he associates his conscientious actions as being masculine. In the film, Miriam's husband believes his actions are justified and conscientious, and disapproves his wife's actions (Berg 105).

Conclusion

Thoreau's essay, "Civil Disobedience" provides a light for examining state policy with complete objectivity and passivity. His actions are informed by conscience and a desire to bring about a peaceful revolution. In *Rereading America*, Colombo's argues for the need to think and analyze the norms and cultural myths in our society. All these factors are represented in plot development in the film 'The Long Walk Home', which is based on the dynamics of causing widespread social change.

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