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Oppression in *Exile and Pride*

In the memoir *Exile and Pride,* by Eli Clare, Clare morphs into a person he was not aware existed because of the different forms of oppression he experienced in his life. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, oppression is “prolonged cruel or unjust treatment or exercise of authority, control or power; tyranny; exploitation.” (Oxford English Dictionary). Less formally, oppression is “the unjust keeping down of others by force” (Urban Dictionary). Although not used frequently, oppression is quite evident, both directly and indirectly, throughout Clare’s novel. Throughout his childhood, authority figures oppressed Clare because of his disability, his sexuality, and his class. Due to this prolonged oppression by family members and members of his closely-knit community, Clare undergoes rediscovery and regrowth, and ultimately reevaluates his identity in relation to those around him, allowing him to morph both his oppression and other’s oppression into self-empowerment and self-love.

In relation to the memoir, the key term in the modern definition of oppression is exploitation. Exploitation as a mode of oppression is evident in many passages in the novel, and throughout Clare’s childhood. Oppression and exploitation have morphed Clare’s identity in ways that nondisabled people would never experience. Due to his disability, Clare was an easy target for oppression and exploitation as a child and a young adult. He looked different, acted different, and felt different. In the beginning of the novel, Clare describes the scenery of his hometown in the backwoods of Oregon. He describes the acres of old growth and second growth forests, the rivers with salmon, the logging trucks, the rolling hills, and the beautiful scenery of Siskiyous. He reflects upon memories of him and his father in the clearcuts, chopping wood for winter. The idea of home comforts Clare; he is unable to identify himself without touching upon his hometown and home environment. However, that environment was also the home to oppression and exploitation. Without the oppression and exploitation that home provided, Clare may not have realized his true identity in relation to his sexuality and disability.

Oppression and exploitation began before Clare can even remember. He states that his father “who started raping [him] so young [he] can’t remember when he first forced his penis into [him]” (Clare, 145). Along with Clare’s father, his father’s friends would rape Clare, making Clare feel disconnected to his body and prompting him to question his gender identity. Clare already felt disassociated with society’s definition of feminine; he found solace when one of his mother’s friends mistook him for a young boy. After his father and his father’s friends started raping him, he began to question these feelings with a greater magnitude, growing farther and farther apart from the feminine side of himself and deeper into the unknown. Although Clare already felt disconnected with his body, this nonstop and malicious oppression that began before Clare even remembers, had an integral impact on his search for his identity; he states “My childhood sense of being neither girl nor boy arose in part from the external lessons of abuse and neglect, from the confusing messages about masculinity and femininity that I could not comprehend; I would be a food to claim otherwise” (150).

Clare has endured much more oppression than sexual oppression throughout his life so far. Intersectionality, the idea that people experience oppression in multiple forms and degrees, is a key term to describe the magnitude of oppression Clare has experienced. As a disabled person, Clare has dealt with numerous stereotypes about “crips” and “supercrips.” In grade school, Clare wanted to be “normal” like the rest of the kids. Since he was placed in class with nondisabled children, he was seen as a supercrip, simply for achieving the same level of success as nondisabled children. He did not accomplish some great feat; he was simply seen differently for achieving the same goal as a nondisabled person. His success was stolen from him. Also, as a disabled person, Clare was never seen as a sexual object. Society rarely objectifies the sexuality of a disabled body, leaving an unrealistic expectation for disabled people to aspire to. The idea that disabled people must meet the same expectations that abled society formulates implies a feeling of power, exploitation or control: oppression. Although not explicitly stated, these types of stereotypes derived by able society, act as a form of oppression. Clare does not use the word “oppression” to describe these acts in part because it would generalize them and morph them into the same category as abuse. These types of oppressive acts and/or ideas may be better described using some ancient definitions of the word oppression. Oppression used to mean anything ranging from an overwhelming task, to pressure, to constriction (Oxford English Dictionary). Perhaps describing this type of oppression as constriction would best describe the form of oppression society forces upon disabled people. However, unlike many disabled people, Clare is able to separate his sexuality from the societal “norm.” He is able to identify “The work of thieves: certainly external perception, stereotypes, lies, false images, and oppression hold a tremendous amount of power. They define and create who we are, how we think of our bodies, our gendered selves” (152). However, many disabled and oppressed people are unable to take a step back and reflect upon self-hatred that was brought upon them by society. Clare implies that many people internalize oppression by society in a way that makes all the lies and misconceptions seem true.

Through years of external and internal oppression, Clare has matured and reflected upon whom he identifies as. He has morphed that oppression into pride and self-appreciation. He states, “I want to sharpen my pride on what strengthens me, my witness on what haunts me. Whatever we name ourselves, however we end up shattering our self-hatred, shame, silence, and isolation, the goal is the same: to end our daily material oppression” (118). Beginning as a wounded and rejected young girl, Clare finds himself as a result of direct and indirect internal and external oppression. He grows into an empowered and inspiring man.

Works Cited

Clare, Eli. *Exile and Pride.* Cambridge, MA: South End Press, 1999. Print.

“Oppression.” *Oxford English Dictionary.* n.p, n.d. 26 Sept. 2014. Print

“Oppression.” *Urban Dictionary.* n.p, n.d. 26 Sept. 2014. Print.

The word itself has been around for centuries. Some ancient definitions of oppression include: an overwhelming task, pressure, the state of being overcome, and constriction or affliction. The key term in the definition of oppression is “exploitation.”