

Beyond Guilt: Outrage, Punishment, and the Political Potential of the Trauma Novel

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Julie Otsuka's *When the Emperor was Divine* tells a fictionalized story of a family's relocation to a Japanese internment camp in 1942. With simple prose, the Japanese-American Otsuka "makes a shameful episode of our history as immediate as today's headlines," according to the novel's back cover blurb. Upon first glance, the book falls right into the category that Sumana Roy deems "Guilt Lit": a genre that "typecasts the 'marginalized' as victims of power, a role they play for our own moral cleansing" (Guilt Lit). Indeed, one can envision with disgust the self-righteous reader digesting the harrowing tale with elation, moved by his own effort of moral cleansing. I argue, however, that the growing obsession with critiquing Guilt Lit is a reductive act, scarcely generating any change — whether moral or literal. Instead, Blakey Vermeule's article, "A Comeuppance Theory of Narrative and Emotions," offers a more intriguing lens toward reading the "trauma novel" (Granofsky), prompting one to question how a reader's struggle not exactly with guilt but with the desire to punish can prompt political change. By setting William Flesch's notion of "moral outrage" against Roy's emphasis on guilt, I turn to Vermeule's interest in how one navigates moral dissatisfaction in reaction to moments of injustice. While Vermeule selects George Eliot's *Middlemarch* to portray how authorial resistance of comeuppance endings produces "mature" readings, she does not account for what occurs when *no* character is positioned to punish at all, and the urge to enact punishment falls entirely upon the reader — as is the case with *When the Emperor was Divine*. In reorienting the trauma novel through its evocation of anger, as opposed to guilt, I dismantle Roy's critique of "Guilt Lit" while highlighting the genre's power to produce political action.

The core of both Roy's and Vermeule's theories lies in the same thing: how stories produce strong emotions. Vermeule pushes herself to understand the chasm between affect and

rationality and its impact on one's digestion of a text, but the engine of her argument still revolves around how narratives produce the desire to punish: "What does it mean to want to punish other people for their defections?" (Vermeule 250). Vermeule's starting point is William Flesch's *Comeuppance: Costly Signaling, Altruistic Punishment, and Other Biological Components of Fiction* (2007), which argues that stories exercise a "sense of moral outrage" (Vermeule 235). Vermeule then adds that "if Flesch is right, many of our strongest emotions are spurred by thoughts of injustice and unfairness" (250). The trauma novel, then — or in other words, a novel describing systemic injustices — with all its depictions of tragedy and unfairness, is certain to produce moral outrage and thus to offer a lens through which to examine people's physiological urge for comeuppance. Similarly, Roy targets the trauma novel for the emotion it produces: "The stress on literature as a courier from the underprivileged world to ours, [leads] to this passive activism — the activation of guilt" (Guilt Lit). Put simply, Roy boils the effect of the trauma novel to guilt, and she goes on to describe the emotion as self-indulgent. With these frameworks in mind, the question for anybody suspicious of the term "Guilt Lit" becomes this: Does a trauma novel produce "moral outrage" or guilt? And, how are the two different?

A close analysis of a paragraph depicting injustice may elucidate just how the two emotions differ. After waking up in the internment camp, Otsuka's present protagonist — a young boy — experiences anxiety: "At night he woke up crying out, 'Where am I?' Sometimes he felt a hand on his shoulder and it was his sister telling him it was all a bad dream. 'Go back to sleep, baby,' she'd whisper, and he would. Sometimes there was no answer" (Otsuka 57). From afar, one understands how such a paragraph would produce moral outrage; the image of a boy, saddened, confused, and stripped of his home, would certainly prompt anger, or abhorrence, or indignation, over this bitter period of America's history. The critic of Guilt Lit, however, would

be cynical of such emotions. They would argue that such negative emotions inevitably lead to one's metaphorical exercising at "the ethical-political gym" (Guilt Lit). Yes, they'd point out how, of course, the boy is "crying out" instead of "asking," as Otsuka must exaggerate his pain — must make him a "joyless creature, angry or sorrowful, waiting for the moment when they can breast the tape of equality" (Guilt Lit). From Roy's perspective, it is condescending how the novel allows the reader to bask in guilt as they learn "sometimes there was no answer" and feel the self-satisfying need to tell the boy, "it will be okay, baby." The dialectic movement from any "moral outrage" to guilt is Roy's exact notion of "passive activism." In this way, *When the Emperor was Divine* — which won a handful of literary awards — could certainly be criticized for stripping marginalized characters of joy and taking part in tokenism. Yes, by portraying the boy in a state of utter helplessness, Otsuka feeds into the privileged person's "almost hormonal" (Guilt Lit) desire for guilt — an agreeably offensive thing.

Yet even within this critique of Guilt Lit, one may spot a logical error: feelings of outrage do not necessarily translate into guilt. What if the reader is simply angry for the young boy? What if their "urge to do good" (Guilt Lit) remains unsatisfied, and they instead remain troubled by an "eruption of anger" (Vermeule, 236), like the people who were angry on behalf of the Ghanaians when Luis Suarez committed a flagrant foul in the 2010 World Cup? Anger, I posit, is the flipside of guilt, and the two emotions possess far different ontological properties. As Roy accurately suggests, guilt is inherently intrinsic, directed toward the self. A guilty person burrows into how *bad* they feel, and then they are free to feel *good* for feeling bad. Anger, however, demands another actor: a person toward whom they are angry. In his theory of altruistic punishment, Flesch explains that "we have developed an intense interest in one another's inner lives so that we can effectively monitor defection and cooperation" (Vermeule 237). As with

almost any other book of fiction, one feels tied to the protagonist and consequently resonates or feels empathetic toward some part of the injustice he is subject to. Otsuka's story thereby triggers this need to monitor defection, and crucially, there is a defector within this book: the American state.

Before I progress with the role of altruistic punishment in *When the Emperor was Divine*, it is crucial to note that Roy, again, would criticize the desire for comeuppance, as it still rids the marginalized group of agency and designates the reader a hero. However, Roy's argument remains unproductive because her reduction of all emotional reactions to the trauma novel — anger, bitterness, outrage, etc. — into guilt places the reader in an immobile position, where they will inevitably practice “passive activism” (Guilt Lit). Perhaps Roy means for more nuance, but the term “Guilt Lit” itself — and her 14 uses of the word “guilt” within the lean article — suggests otherwise. “We now approach literature with the expectation that we will feel guilty,” she writes. Everything is channeled into this singular emotion. The reader will feel guilty that the boy cries. The reader will feel guilty that there was no answer. However, she concludes that “guilt will not heal the world” (Guilt Lit). In an ironic turn, Roy's critique of Guilt Lit only prompts the self-righteous thinker into a further cycle of guilt, where there seems to be no option to ethically read a novel detailing injustice. As a solution, Roy prompts the reader to seek the “experience of joy in literature,” and in her article “The Problem With the Postcolonial,” she elaborates that this can occur “not through substitution, but addition” of literature about joy on the syllabus. While the latter point appears unlikely — after all, addition cannot occur without some subtraction — the first point remains true that readers *should* seek joy in literature. This, however, does nothing to amend the issue Roy raised of how one can ethically read “Guilt Lit.”

Just like the emotion of guilt, then, the critique of *Guilt Lit* is self-obsessed and collapses upon itself.

While guilt is closed-ended, outrage is not. This is where Vermeule's argument about comeuppance enters. In *Middlemarch*, readers witness numerous sites of injustice — incomparable to those in a trauma novel, but still, injustice — like when Fred Vincy is unable to pay back debt to the Garth family. The difference between *Middlemarch* and *When the Emperor was Divine*, though, is that Eliot's characters possess systemic agency. The Garth family does not face legal, physical, or social violence like the family in the Japanese internment camp did; no, Mrs. Garth possesses some power to enact her own sense of punishment upon Fred. Crucially, Vermeule agrees that humans possess a desire to enact altruistic punishment: "She turns some of her characters into designated punishers. A designated punisher gets to have the emotional satisfaction of an "aha" moment, whereas a capacious moral visionary does not. Of the two, the capacious moral visionary is surely more mature" (252). However, without someone like Mrs. Garth, a designated punisher, in *When the Emperor Was Divine*, the reader cannot reach the status of the "capacious moral visionary" where they gracefully grapple with the fact that comeuppance might not prevail. No, with trauma novels, the reader is likely left craving the 'aha' moment, as Otsuka's characters lack the power — politically, socioeconomically, physically — to punish the defector: the American state. For the sake of my argument, it is less important to discuss how Eliot illuminates how "human moral activity is both punitive and blind to its own intentions" (Vermeule 253) via her obscuring of satisfying comeuppance and more important to note her characters' agency. Even though Mrs. Garth's attempt to punish Fred is in many ways a failure, what matters is that the reader is not left with the need to punish.

When the Emperor Was Divine's conclusion offers a potent look at what occurs when a narrative produces anger toward a real object, yet its characters are unable to take action upon this anger. In the closing chapter titled "Confession," the father of the relocated family — who had been long separated from the family — enters a stream-of-consciousness soliloquy:

Everything you have heard is true. I was wearing my bathrobe, my slippers, the night your men took me away. At the station they asked me questions. *Talk to us*, they said. The room was small and bare. It had no windows. The lights were bright. They left them on for days. What more can I tell you? My feet were cold. I was tired. I was thirsty. I was scared. So I did what I had to do. I talked. All right, I said. I admit it ... I spied on you — you get up at six, you like bacon and eggs, you love baseball, you take your coffee with cream, your favorite color is blue. (140-141)

While the majority of the novel takes place in third-person omniscient narration, Otsuka upturns the novel's tone in its final few pages through the introduction of the first-person and second-person narration. The "you" is striking. Roy's imagined reader — the guilt-obsessed one — would take all of the "you"s to mean themselves. They would receive the father's harsh message, carry the blame, and then their "moral cleansing" would be complete. However, Otsuka explicitly guides the reader into understanding that the "you" is a different object: something that likes bacon and eggs, baseball, coffee with cream. Evidently, the protagonist directs his explosive stream-of-consciousness toward the average American man. The entire passage, with the anaphora, the rhetorical question, and the "all right, I said it," builds a tone of powerful resentment. Moreover, the "you" channels immense energy because the phrase "Everything you have heard is true" does in fact initially feel directed at the reader. Since this final chapter opens in second-person, one feels as though the protagonist has crossed the fourth wall, pulling us into the story of injustice, making us a responsible participant for the events of the narrative. This immediacy builds a strong gut reaction; by involving the reader, Otsuka more directly evokes guilt, shock, anger, or any other array of strong emotion. However, as she builds on the

paragraph, she allows the reader to escape their moral discomfort by directing these emotions toward a different “you”: the American man. Critically, in this transition of emotional velocity, guilt must also transform itself into some emotion that can be directed toward a different party, like anger.

Even more, while the narrator possesses some intellectual power to berate the state, his actual body had already been broken down: “Our father, the father we remembered ... was handsome and strong ... The man who came back on the train looked much older than his fifty-six years” (Otsuka 132). By describing the father’s frailness before the turn to his final, explosive soliloquy, Otsuka builds one’s eagerness to punish the “you” on behalf of the narrator who no longer can. Upending the “peak-end rule” (Kahneman 1999: 19) that Vermeule discusses, Otsuka makes the peak and the end the same thing: anger toward the “you.”

Because characters in trauma novels cannot stage punishment within the narrative, the reader is left suspended in a state of moral dissatisfaction, burdened with an unresolved desire to hold something accountable, to amend wrong, or to prevent similar atrocity. Of course, it is difficult to decipher just *how* one can enact “punishment” or release such abstract desires, particularly if the injustices within the trauma novel occurred years ago or if the defector is no longer present. Still, this is also often not the case, as the defector within *When the Emperor was Divine* — the American state — still remains a defector today. While this recognition remains broad, it shifts the ontological power of the trauma novel outward, away from self-directed guilt and toward true action, like protest or public dissent, especially if one recognizes a similar defector in reality: for example, the Trump administration and its construction of Alligator Alcatraz. It is true that trauma novels cannot — and should not — bear the full burden of political action. Even so, by reframing *how* readers can navigate their emotional responses to the

trauma novel, one can encourage outward engagement with injustice as opposed to perpetuating a sea of guilty — and self-satisfied — passive activists.

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