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Commodity Fetishism in *Rickshaw Boy* and *Mine Boy*

Lao She's *Rickshaw Boy* and Peter Abrahams *Mine Boy* provide an example of Slavoj Žižek's theories of commodity fetishism and reification detailed in "The Sublime Object of Ideology". Using fictitious narratives of working class characters, each author shows their reader the affects that such ideological forces have on reification. Each work provides an example of Žižek's theories in that many of the characters assign a meaning to certain objects that are different from what they should truly signify with the process of reification being propelled by the social, economic, and political conditions present around each of the characters. By examining how the characters have fetishized and taken objects through reification the reader can begin to understand the motivations and rationale of the characters.

Throughout Žižek's essay "The Sublime Object of Ideology" he lays out his theories of ideology and how they manifest in society while motivating and altering their perceptions. Combining ideas from Karl Marx, Sigmund Freud, and Jacques Lacan he identifies three main concepts that must be understood, false consciousness, commodity fetishes, and reification. He defines false consciousness based off of the traditional Marxist definition as being one of two things: as the lack of perception of the real material conditions that are in existence or the nature of social relations in society due to the operations of society. He draws from Marx's idea that every "ideological universal" in the world is false (Žižek 716). Žižek further adds to this theory by stressing that ideology is not just an illusory depiction of reality but rather it is the reality

itself that is ideological. He argues that it is not just what is around society that is ideological, but rather the people in society are ideological constructs themselves (Žižek 716). It is in this state of false consciousness that society is mystified by ideology.

Žižek drew from both Freud and Marx with the idea to avoid fetishistic fascination of commodities. He, however, identifies the problem as being able to explain why work in commodity assumed a value form (Žižek 712). According to Marx, a commodity fetish is simply when a commodity takes on a signification for something that it is not. He asserts that when a commodity fetish is developed society becomes alienated from the operations behind the product. When the commodity becomes a “thing” itself it has gone through reification. Once a commodity has reached this stage the identity of the commodity no longer has anything to do with the reality of the commodity (Žižek 719). Žižek furthers this argument to add that one must not only look at what the ideological subject or individual *thinks* or *knows* but also what the individual is *doing*. He argues that a subject realizes on an everyday level the relations between people and things (commodity fetishism) but what they do not know is that their social activity is guided by these fetish illusions. He asserts that these concepts are not just a theory but a practice as well. The illusion is on the side of reality as well as knowledge (Žižek 720-21).

Žižek also draws from Peter Sloterdijk and Marx to identify the two parts of ideology. The first part is what is called mystification, where the consumer is truly unaware of the ideological influences behind a commodity. The second is cynicism which is the idea that there are consumers that are aware of the ideological influences behind a commodity but choose to ignore it because there is nothing they can do about it (Žižek 718).

Both Xiangzi from *Rickshaw Boy* and Leah from *Mine Boys* fetishize money and put it through the process of reification by seeing money as synonymous with power. At the beginning

of *Rickshaw Boy* Xiangzi is very much consumed with his drive for money and finds it to be a source of comfort or "safeguard against fear" (122). He firmly believed that no matter what life threw at him, everything could be solved with money. After finding out about Huniu being pregnant the narrator notes, "There was nothing to think about. With money, anything was possible. He was confident that the contents of his bank would solve all his problems, so there was no need to think" (105). He felt that the money was his "friend" who he could always depend upon (96). In these early passages it is clear that Xiangzi fetishizes money by attaching additional value to money than what it really is worth. The scene in which Xiangzi must buy his life from Detective Sun exemplifies for Xiangzi the "power" of money. From this point on money is viewed as a source of power. When he is married to Huniu he muses over the thought that once money is given to you by someone else that person has power over you (183). Xiangzi is not the only character that recognizes this correlation. Huniu is quick to draw attention to the fact that she is the one who has the money and has paid for everything in order to assert her dominance and power (183). At one point she even decides to withhold money for a second rickshaw because she recognizes that the money is "the source of her power" (201).

Money is also fetishized and undergoes reification in *Mine Boy* through Leah as well. Upon one of her first encounters with Zuma Leah shakes her purse bag and tells him, "This is power" (21). Just like in *Rickshaw Boy*, money is used as a way to buy freedom by paying off the police and others to keep her alcohol business quiet. Leah also personifies money like Xiangzi by telling Zuma, "Money is your best friend. With money you can buy a policeman. With money you can buy somebody to go to jail for you" (50). These passages show that just as in *Rickshaw Boy*, money is viewed here as not just a piece of paper or a coin that signifies an amount of

finance, but rather it is a source of power. It has a meaning and significance beyond the monetary value. Both characters have attached an additional meaning to money.

It is not surprising that this sort of reification would take place in either novels since in both working class novels, those with the most power are those who have money. In *Rickshaw Boy* you see Fourth Master Liu who has immense influence and power in his world but also has money and owns the means of production. In *Mine Boys* the mine owners and the white colonizers are the ones who have the most power and also the most money. Through economic need it also makes sense that these characters who are part of the lower class would feel like money is a sort of power because it is only by using money that they can gain any sort of influence. Similarly, those who have the most political influence in the text are also those with money. In *Rickshaw Boy* the reader is presented with characters like Mr. Chao and his associates who have political influence and money. In *Mine Boy*, although it is not directly discussed, it is implied that the mine owners are those with the most political power. By having these and other examples of money correlating with influence and power in society a social ideology is created where the characters believe that only those with power can have power. Marx argued that those who own the means of production are those who determine the dominant ideas that keep the dominant parts in place. In these texts those who held the means of production--and money--are part of the super structure that produces ideology that holds together the base which helps society stay stagnant. Due to the ideologies and commonly held beliefs that the owners are distributing the characters are unable to see through the facade. They are unable to see that one does not have to have money to have power. Zuma finally realizes this at the end of the novel when he chooses to stand with his fellow workers to fight against the injustices.

Due to this ideology the characters develop a commodity fetish for certain products owned by the ruling elite. In *Rickshaw Boy*, Xiangzi fetishizes the rickshaw at the beginning of the novel. Instead of just viewing the rickshaw as a means of production, he puts it through reification and sees the rickshaw as a source of freedom and independence. Like the money, he also personifies the rickshaw describing it as an attachment to his body (She 4 & 12). In addition, to Xiangzi, owning his own rickshaw was also signified a type of class. To him one who owns his own rickshaw was "high-class" or an "aristocrat" (4 & 62). In *Mine Boy*, Zuma and Eliza fetishize the "white man's things". Instead of looking at the objects for what they are Eliza sees them as signifiers for white life. In her mind having those things is what makes one white but in reality they are just "things" nothing more. Zuma has the same belief. Both characters think that if a person was to possess these objects then they are trying to embody "whiteness". The numerous descriptions of Black people in "the clothes of the white people" are an example of how this is manifested in the text. Unlike in *Rickshaw Boy* where Xiangzi is disillusioned to the fetish through his own experiences, Zuma is directly confronted by both the "Red One's" girlfriend and the doctor. The doctor tries to dismantle his fetish that has underwent reification by attempting to explain to Zuma that his house is just a house with things in it--not signifiers of whiteness but Zuma cannot accept it (75).

Žižek stated that there are two parts of ideology, mystification and cynicism. These two novels present an example of both. At the start of each novel both Xiangzi and Zuma are in a state of mystification. Both characters believe in the popular ideological concepts that define social, political, and economic status without question. Xiangzi believes that owning a rickshaw and having money will solve everything because they are both sources of power and freedom. He believes that if he works as hard he can then he will be able to achieve happiness. He is unable to

see how much he is exploited as a worker. Huniu is an example of cynicism because she understands the exploitation of the rickshaw puller and tries to explain that to Xiangzi but ultimately fails. Eventually although aware of the exploitation, she gives in and encourages him to pull the rickshaw because they need money. Zuma is mystified because he too is unable to see the exploitation of labor at the beginning of the novel. The "Red One", like Huniu, tries to confront Zuma and make him realize the exploitation that he and the other workers suffer, but like Xiangzi he does not see it at first. Although the "Red One" recognizes the exploitation and the operations behind the product he ignores them until the end of the novel because these exploitations are the very thing that provides for his job.

Through the way the characters assign additional meanings to money and certain objects one can see how they have fetishized certain items due to the ideology that has been proliferated by the political and socioeconomic conditions around them. Each novel offers an example of Žižek's theories of mystification and cynicism while showing how these characters have been affected by the ideology that surrounds them into fetishizing and putting commodities through reification.

Works Cited

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