

HUMANITIES



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READING RED: *OUT* FROM A PROLETARIAN PERSPECTIVE

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The psychological thriller *Out* explores a multitude of socioeconomic issues, misogyny, and violence prevalent in Natsuo Kirino's portrayal of Japanese society. The novel follows four working-class women, each bearing the weight of her own world, as they become consumed in a seedy murder plot. Using Marxist and socioeconomic approaches to analyze *Out*, I will be illustrating how Kirino highlights the arduous working conditions and the struggles of the working class. By modernizing proletarian ideals from Marxist theory, Kirino creates a poignant criticism of contemporary capitalism and the incessantly consumerist society that it perpetuates.

Our class discussions have delineated at length Kirino's representation of the backbreaking working conditions at the bento box factory featured in the novel and her criticisms of capitalism. In class discussions, all participants agree that the demeaning environment of the factory emphasizes Kirino's critique of the traditional capitalist workplace. Nickole Feliciano explains that *Out* "aligns with the Marxist idea of alienation, where labor becomes a means of survival rather than a source of personal fulfillment." Feliciano emphasizes how the factory and its poor wages fuel the pervasive consumerist society that Kirino portrays as a consequence of careless capitalism. Enola Garner adds, "When it comes to consumerism, I think Kirino criticizes this with the several examples of workers who are sacrificing their health and wellbeing [sic] to do this job for little pay to produce endless amounts of product, and the work is ultimately under-appreciated and thankless." Both students emphasize the bleak outlook within the factory and society itself,

illustrating Kirino's rebuke to oppressive systems. I will take these claims further and prove that Kirino uses proletarian sentiments and imagery to criticize the capitalist system.

In my analysis, I am drawing attention to proletarianism rather than strictly traditional Marxist ideologies. While Marxism and proletarianism may appear the same, proletarianism applies broader Marxist principles. Proletarian culture places a greater emphasis on personal liberation and everyday resistance (Greenberg 414). Conversely, Marxism advocates for organized revolution and formalized, systemic restructuring of economic policies. Marxism is proletarianism on a macro scale; Marxism highlights radical attempts to dismantle capitalist structures by destroying their foundations, whereas proletarianism values small-scale efforts and navigating daily life.

The available literary criticism for Natsuo Kirino's *Out* delves deep into the characters and the setting to create a profound depiction of various socioeconomic and feminist issues. One prominent work is Amanda Seaman's article "Inside *OUT*," which provides context for the novel's gendered and capitalist society. Most notably, Seaman conveys that *Out* has its roots in proletarian literature, though "a strict proletarian reading of the novel is defeated by Masako's desire to escape Japan and avoid confronting the conditions of production that oppress her" (199). A significant focus of my analysis is proving the alternative to Seaman's statement; *Out* is at the heart of contemporary proletarian literature, made unique by the ending's escapist implications. It is through a proletarian approach that Kirino depicts the arduous labor of the factory workers. Christopher Breu similarly echoes proletarian sentiments in his article as he describes Tokyo as overcome by consumerism, a dark byproduct of capitalism.

While Seaman and Breu focus on *Out* itself, many additional works provide a background to the arguments I present. In order to understand what makes *Out* so predominantly proletarian,

Ivan Greenberg's analysis of American proletarian work provides descriptions of the elements of proletarian writing. While American and Japanese proletarian fiction is vastly different and is shaped by various social contexts, they both have a fundamental focus on the working class that remains constant throughout the cultures. Additionally, Kirkpatrick and Huttner illuminate women's prominent, but often invisible, role in developing proletarian literature. The authors argue that women often utilize proletarian art to convey other social matters, as it "could be a vehicle for feminist issues" (Kirkpatrick & Huttner 145). Kirino follows suit and imbues her novel with many complex social issues beyond capitalism. Finally, Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels' *The Communist Manifesto*, the lodestone of the Marxist movement that inspired proletarianism, defines the proletarian and bourgeoisie classes and their respective power imbalance. The strains of working-class proletarians outlined within *The Communist Manifesto* can be compared to the protagonist women in *Out*, just as the bourgeoisie is mirrored in the oppressive factory, emphasizing the similarities between Marx and Engels' criticism of capitalism and Kirino's condemnation through the lives of her characters.

Kirino explains, according to Amanda Seaman, that *Out* has roots in Japanese proletarian writing dating back to the 1920s. Seaman writes that the novel was influenced by "Kani kōsen (The factory ship), a masterpiece of proletarian literature written in 1928" (199). Kani kōsen, written by Marxist author Takiji Kobayashi, tells the story of workers trapped aboard a factory ship and abused by their captain, a representation of the capitalist system. As the characters attempt to band together and revolt, they are beaten within inches of their lives, with one character ultimately losing his life at sea (Seaman 199). As Kirino used this as her inspiration for *Out*, it is only fitting that her novel should follow in the same footsteps decades later, revived with contemporary feminist ideals. Ivan Greenberg explains that in 1935, the American Writers Conference was able to set guiding parameters

for the classification of proletarian literature. He writes that two of the most critical facets of proletarian arts are “an adherence to Marxist ideology, and a focus on working class subjects” (Greenberg 437). Again, though proletarian context varies in each culture, the main structures of the movement remain steadfast throughout time and space. These works depict blue-collar workers in various stages of struggle, defeat, and subjectivity to an abusive ruling class (Greenberg 436). Thus, proletarian literature typically features a subjective ending, rarely celebrating the downfall of the bourgeoisie. Additionally, proletarians and the working class understand that economic and class structures intersect, amplifying gender, race, and identity politics to a higher level of importance. Kirino uses this to formulate the plot of *Out*, drawing attention to these cynical aspects of society.

Out uses a proletarian perspective to emphasize the flaws in a capitalist environment. Though Seaman claims that this perspective is “defeated” because Masako chooses to ultimately “avoid confronting the conditions of production that oppress her,” this is a shallow stance, as proletarian principles are more than mere confrontation and need not be radical. *Out* allows the proletarian class to be brought to life against the bourgeoisie, and the protagonists’ lives are evidence of the constant barrage of struggles they experience. Like the workers of Kani kōsen, the women are trapped within their demeaning lives at the mercy of the oppressive factory and society as a whole. Kirino does not sugar-coat the egregious factory conditions that drive the women to resort to anything, even murder, for a chance to be free from its hopeless confines. The majority of the night shift workers are middle-aged women and minorities, and their tasks are inhumanely demanding. Kirino describes their work on the conveyor belt, narrating, “It took a good deal of strength in the wrist and fingers to flatten the little squares of cold, compact rice . . . and the half-stooping position made it hard on the back . . . pain would be shooting from your spine through your shoulders, and it became difficult to lift your arms” (Kirino

11). After ceaseless hours of this work, the women are exhausted and desperate for a reprieve. Masako specifies that the work is not only physically demanding but “designed to break your spirit too” (Kirino 120). Yoshie admits to often feeling “like a worn-out rag” after her shifts, willing to trade the world for a moment of sleep (Kirino 22). The horrific description of this work creates an image of the gritty reality of women in the capitalist setting. The workers are exploited without end, used only to achieve a product. This mirrors Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels’ illustration of a capitalist institution, providing parallels to the inhumanity of capitalism. They write, “As privates of the industrial army they are placed under the command of a perfect hierarchy of officers and sergeants. Not only are they slaves of the bourgeois class . . . they are daily and hourly enslaved by the machine” (Marx and Engels 17). By vividly criticizing the sadistic conditions of the factory, Kirino demonstrates her condemnation of capitalism and expresses her Marxist ideologies. She continues to adhere to these values as she delves into the lives of each protagonist, which comprises a sample of the proletarian force struggling against the factory oppressor.

The working-class background of the characters shapes their relationships and defines their personalities. The experiences that the women endure resonate deeply with proletarian themes, exposing the exploitation they face and the solidarity that binds them together. Kirino writes, “The four women always worked together and tried to help each other out, otherwise the job would have been tougher” (9). Yoshie and Masako demonstrate the most developed bond, with Yoshie admitting to her, “I’m willing to march into hell if I’m following you” (Kirino 267). In addition to their shared victimization of the capitalist system, the women are also bound together by financial insecurity resulting from their low-paying labor. Most of the women are living paycheck to paycheck, except for Masako. She uses this to her advantage and manipulates her friends into doing her bidding. After drawing Yoshie into the dismembering scheme by tempting her with

money, Yoshie remarks, “So you’re planning to buy me in, knowing I can’t resist . . . Okay, okay. You’ve got it,” said Yoshie, the prospect of money having finally broken down her resistance” (Kirino 77). Kuniko suffers from similar burdens and weighs the cost of her actions as if every decision is a transaction. After throwing all her money away on expensive products, she reflects if “she should just declare bankruptcy. She had toyed with the idea, but if she went ahead with it, she might be cut off from her precious credit cards for life. There was always the old solution of trying to live within her means – but she’d rather die than do that!” (Kirino 238). Kuniko is constantly strapped between her material desires and the capitalist reality. She depends on instant gratification, a repercussion of a degrading consumerist system.

It is ultimately impossible to separate these women from their circumstances without completely restructuring their personalities; their class position as proletarians is weaved into their relationships and very lives. Their shared economic struggles, physical exploitation, and solidarity provide a compelling backdrop that tests the strength of their morals and connections. The characters must navigate their lives within the overarching societal and economic constraints forced upon them in their working-class reality.

As earlier mentioned by Kirkpatrick and Huttner, proletarian sentiments within literature are used “as a vehicle for feminist issues” (145). Throughout *Out*, Kirino explores ideas of sexism, misogyny, victimization, and women’s rights in postmodern Tokyo. This functions well when coupled with the criticism of capitalism. Proletarian, as opposed to Marxist, ideals rose in popularity amongst writers, especially women, because it allowed them “to introduce new topics and new ways of looking at old topics” (Kirkpatrick and Huttner 146). Kirino describes a wide range of issues in *Out* that the women experience that had been previously unmentioned in Japanese literature. For example, Masako is a model of the gender inequality infecting the workforce. As she is pushed out of her long-term career

because she is a middle-aged woman, Kirino voices the gender-based discrimination that women experience in the male-dominated society. Additionally, domestic violence is rampant throughout the novel. Yayoi falls victim to her husband's tantrums and has the evidence to prove it: "Right near her solar plexus was a conspicuous dark blue bruise. Her husband had punched her there last night" (Kirino 45). In such a gendered society, issues of domestic violence such as Yayoi's are often symptomatic of women in lower socioeconomic positions and would often go overlooked. However, Kirino draws attention to it, featuring a heroine who refuses to be the submissive housewife craved by society.

The women also search for autonomy, wanting to be free of the vices that hold them down. Bound by economic struggles, parasitic family members, and the weight of their pasts, the women attempt to pursue individuality despite their defining proletarian identity. Masako comes the closest to reaching this freedom, culminating in the final paragraph of the novel as she realizes, "The freedom she was seeking was her own, not Satake's, or Yayoi's, or Yoshie's, and she was sure it must be out there somewhere" (Kirino 400). *Out* constitutes an intersection between the dangers of capitalism and patriarchal burdens on women, attacking capitalism from one direction and systemic sexism from another. The women are illustrated as controlled by these societal conventions, existing at the crossroads of an outdated society where it is nearly impossible for a woman to lead a fulfilling life.

Amanda Seaman objects to the idea that *Out* is proletarian because the victimized women want to get "out" of their conditions. However, the characters' wishes to escape from their lives describe the reality of working-class women, beaten down by society and depicted in their "vignettes of suffering" (Kirkpatrick and Huttner 146). The image of suffering is crucial in proletarian literature, as it expresses the depravity of capitalism. As Masako leaves her current life behind, she makes the pragmatic choice to turn her back on her oppressed life and the misogynistic society of Tokyo. Masako reflects, "But she'd

come this far; where could she go now?" She thinks of all the physical markings she bears as a token of her endurance, both at the factory and in her own home, and continues, "What had it all meant?" (Kirino 400). Masako frees herself from these confinements, finding her way off the factory ship and rising in a silent, individual mutiny that parallels the loud, cooperative rebellion that arose in the crab canning ship of Kani kōsen. Masako has done what the sailors could not, as she escapes the capitalist system with its merciless consumerism, sexism, and misogyny that had trapped her for so long. This visualization of an escape illustrates the reality of a proletarian worker in their pursuit of individual freedom against the bourgeoisie. By humanizing the working class and giving their struggle a voice, Kirino revives proletarian ideologies and leads a new campaign against the bourgeoisie onslaught and all the vices that it heralds in the modern world.

Natsuo Kirino's use of proletarianism provides commentary on the arduous working conditions within Japanese factory life. The narrative combines the dark reality of oppressive working conditions with human resiliency to create a testament of the working-class experience. Through the lens of proletarianism, Kirino additionally showcases the many feminist complexities that arise from capitalism. Though critics overlook the proletarianism within *Out*, it introduces a new outlook that transcends the original tropes of Marxist fiction, suggesting that proletarians should strive for individual freedom however they can achieve it, even if it means putting their past behind them. With the rise of global capitalism and growing income inequality, the relevance of proletarian literature has never been more pressing. Kirino contributes to this movement with her powerful addition to modern proletarian literature. ■

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