

Navigating Identity through Acts of Disobedience

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Throughout history, acts of disobedience have often sparked social transformation by challenging unjust systems and advancing human freedom. Whether resisting political injustice, cultural erasure, or economic exploitation, individuals who refuse to conform always drive necessary change. According to Erich Fromm, disobedience is a necessary act of moral courage and an important driver of social progress (Fromm 326). This idea is vividly illustrated by three stories: “The Ones Who Walk Away” from Omelas (Le Guin), “Borders” (King) and “Unauthorized Bread” (Doctorow). In each work, the protagonists, exhibiting different forms of disobedience in response to unjust systems, demonstrate that resistance is essential for preserving human dignity and freedom. Through their navigation of societal roles, whether by acceptance, resistance or defiance, these characters offer implicit critiques of both individual choices and the broader societal structures that frame them. Together, the three stories affirm Fromm’s belief that disobedience is a moral necessity (Fromm 326).

All acts of disobedience begin with an emotional or moral awakening. The characters in “The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas,” “Borders,” and “Unauthorized Bread” experience this realization differently, and their initial reactions reveal different emotional and moral response to the pressure to conform. In “The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas” by Le Guin, when some people realize that society’s prosperity is built on one single child’s misery, they choose to leave silently (Le Guin 1510). Their moral response is a

silent reckoning and a rejection of complicity, not public confrontation. In contrast, the mother in “Borders” by King choose to react immediately through vocal refusal. When questioned about her national identity, she refuses to be Canadian or American but insist on her identity as Blackfoot (King 309). When the custom officers repeatedly ask her to choose one side, she firmly replies “Blackfoot side” (King 309). Her public confrontation is a powerful form of resistance. Meanwhile, Salima in “Unauthorized Bread” experiences gradual frustration and eventually chooses to take action. Her recognition of the unjust system is a slow process, starting with her frustration with the realization of her “unauthorized bread” and unauthorized life (Doctorow 14). This awareness leads to her radical action of hacking into the control system. As Fromm pointed out, “human history began with an act of disobedience” (Fromm 326). All three stories show disobedience with moral awakening, and criticize society’s moral failures, with a utopia, a colonial border system, or a corporatized refugee housing system symbolizing various societal structures.

Building upon their initial recognitions, each protagonist adopts a distinct method of active resistance suited to their circumstances. The forms of disobedience vary widely, yet all directly challenge unjust societal expectations. In “The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas,” “They leave Omelas, they walk ahead into the darkness, and they do not come back” (Le Guin 1511). This is a bold act of disobedience, considering that they choose to leave a place of Utopia full of happiness and make a personal choice to stand up for the minority. Whereas the people of Omelas resist through silent exile, the mother in the “Borders” openly confronts the colonial system when questioned about her identity, and she repeatedly replies, “Blackfoot” (King 309). This is a courageous defiance against the bureaucratic system which has erased the Indigenous culture without even realizing how

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important this culture is to the local people. Meanwhile, "Unauthorized Bread" presents a covert but equally radical act of disobedience. Salima not only hacks into the control system but also teaches others to do the same. She successfully turns her private rebellion into a collective empowerment and makes a bigger change. These different acts of disobedience show various possibilities for individuals to resist authority. Furthermore, they indicate that people who are able to resist can achieve freedom, just as Fromm states: "not only is the capacity for disobedience the condition for freedom, freedom is also the condition for disobedience" (Fromm 329). These actions of resistance critique the societal structures of control and its impact on people who live under such control and surveillance.

Although the forms of resistance differ, all three protagonists face significant consequences for choosing disobedience over compliance. The outcomes of their resistance further affirm Fromm's belief that true freedom requires personal sacrifice (Fromm 329). People who walked away from Omelas faced exile and loneliness. They rejected complicity at the cost of their security and community. They were aware of the consequence and were very brave to make this personal choice, as "they seem to know where they are going" (Le Guin 1551). The mother and son in "Borders" suffered from a lack of food and shelter, and they had to stay in their car with limited supplies for several days (King 312). However, they kept their cultural pride, and their open confrontation drew public attention, which helped solve their problem. Similarly, Salima in "Unauthorized Bread" was at risk of punishment, but she reclaims autonomy and helps not only herself but others. The experiences of the three stories again affirm Fromm's statement that "In order to disobey, one must have the courage to be alone, to err, and to sin. But courage is not enough. The capacity for courage

depends on a person's state of development" (Fromm 329). The path to disobedience depends on ability, and the path to freedom requires courage.

Disobedience is essential in confronting injustice and preserving human dignity. Fromm tells us that "A person can become free through acts of disobedience by learning to say no to power" (Fromm 329). A society without disobedience is at risk of moral collapse and authoritarian rule, and obedience can lead to complicity. Disobedience is a hard path which often involves risks and demands sacrifice. However, freedom, dignity and justice are not gifts given by authorities; they are hard battles worth fighting for. True freedom can only survive through the courage to resist. "The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas," "Borders" and "Unauthorized Bread" are examples of resistance to unjust societal structures and how human dignity and moral integrity are safeguarded by disobedience. These stories remind us that the survival of humanity cannot depend on obedience to a flawed system, but rather on the courage of those who disobey according to their conscience.

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