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Cultural Materialism on The Simpsons:
Theory and Praxis of Cultural Analysis

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DEPARTAMENT D'ESTUDIS ANGLESES I ALEMANYS
2022

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Acknowledgements

I would like to thank all the people who have helped me during the completion of my dissertation.

First of all, I would like to thank my tutor, Oriol Batalla. Thank you not only for your support but also for your patience and dedication during all these months of hard work. I am sure that the final result of this project would not have been the same without your help.

My gratitude to all my family for supporting me during the completion of my dissertation. I would have not overcome my mental blocks without your help and patience.

Finally, I would like to thank my friends Andrea M., Andrea P., Helena, Eizan, Ariadna, Cristina, Sara, and Alba for helping me when I needed it and for spending so many afternoons at the library with me.

Abstract

In the times when the term “political correctness” is on point, multimedia services must take that term into consideration. In that way, television series such as *The Simpsons* make a critique of how American society and its culture can sometimes be not so respectful with minorities or women. Therefore, the main objective of study of this dissertation is to make a cultural analysis based on topics related to cultural materialism, which are class struggle, ecocriticism, postcolonialism, and materialist feminism of some episodes of *The Simpsons*. For this purpose, an extensive search for information is carried out on websites specialized in each topic in order to make a proper analysis of each episode. The results show how all these topics are still present in American culture and hence, criticized on the television series.

Keywords: Cultural Materialism, Class Struggle, Ecocriticism, Postcolonialism, Materialist Feminism.

Table of contents

1. Introduction	1
1.1. Objectives	2
1.2. Methodology.....	2
2. Class Struggle on <i>The Simpsons</i>	3
2.1. <i>Last Exit to Springfield</i>	7
2.2. <i>Scenes from the Class Struggle in Springfield</i>	10
3. Ecocriticism on <i>The Simpsons</i>	13
3.1. <i>Two Cars in Every Garage and Three Eyes on Every Fish</i>	15
4. Postcolonialism on <i>The Simpsons</i>	19
4.1. <i>Much Apu About Nothing</i>	21
5. Materialist Feminism on <i>The Simpsons</i>	25
5.1. <i>Lisa vs. Malibu Stacy</i>	28
6. Conclusion	32
7. References	33

1. Introduction

When a person thinks of making a cultural analysis on any song, book, or television series, he or she should also think of cultural materialism. According to Ashely Crossman (2019), cultural materialism aims to study “the relationship between the physical and economic aspects of production. It also explores the values, beliefs, and worldviews that predominate society”. Therefore, if a person studies those physical and economic aspects of a specific society, he or she will see how different or how similar the culture of that society is from his or her own, learning, at the same time, some aspects of the culture of study – including its values and beliefs.

This dissertation aims, hence, to make a cultural analysis based on four topics related to cultural materialism of five different episodes of the television series *The Simpsons*. The four topics in question are class struggle, ecocriticism, postcolonialism and materialist feminism. However, before making the cultural analysis of each topic, this dissertation has a brief introduction of the theory involved in each topic. Thus, this dissertation has theory related to class struggle, ecocriticism, postcolonialism, and materialist feminism along with the corresponding cultural analysis of some episodes of *The Simpsons*.

Those four topics are, indisputably, related to Marxist theory as well – something that makes that the different cultural analysis of this dissertation to be also focused on Marxist theory. Moreover, as this dissertation aims to make a cultural analysis of the television series *The Simpsons*, it must also be taken into account that the culture of study is, precisely, the culture of the United States of America – a country full of diversities.

1.1. Objectives

My intentions in carrying out this dissertation are mainly twofold. First, I want to study – by doing a cultural analysis – the historical aspects that have been silenced throughout history and that are represented in the television series *The Simpsons*, and second, I want to see if this television series allows the viewer to see some ways in which the productive process of the television series has affected the characters present in it and, therefore, the meanings that the television series emits.

1.2. Methodology

For this purpose, books by authors specialized in the different topics covered are used, as well as academic articles and specialized web pages.

2. Class Struggle on *The Simpsons*

All history has been a history of class struggles, of struggles between exploited and exploiting, between dominated and dominating classes at various stages of social development. (Friedrich Engels, 1883, p. 6)

The term “class struggle” was coined by the author and co-author of *The Communist Manifesto*: Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels respectively. In fact, Engels, in the preface to the 1883 German Edition of *The Manifesto of the Communist Party*, claimed:

This struggle, however, has now reached a stage where the exploited and oppressed class (the proletariat) can no longer emancipate itself from the class which exploits and oppresses it (the bourgeoisie), without at the same time forever freeing the whole of society from exploitation, oppression, class struggles – this basic thought belongs solely and exclusively to Marx. (1883, p. 6).

But how did Engels define the terms “proletariat” and “bourgeoisie”? In Chapter 1 of the English edition of the *Communist Manifesto*, Engels gave a definition for both terms. Engels claimed that the proletariat is “the class of modern wage labourers who, having no means of production of their own, are reduced to selling their labour power in order to live” (1888/2021, p. 14); and “by bourgeoisie is meant the class of modern capitalists, owners of the means of social production and employers of wage labour” (1888/2021, p. 14).

From those words, hence, Engels says that Karl Marx thought that workers can no longer liberate themselves from the upper classes unless society as a whole liberates itself

from those upper classes. Moreover, since the workers are being “oppressed” and “exploited” they need to start a struggle against the economically dominant classes, so they need to start a “class struggle”.

In fact, one of the main arguments of *The Communist Manifesto*, and of communist ideology itself, is none other than to erase those differences between classes and make a single class of people ruled by the workers. With this, hence, communism would be the antithesis of capitalism. In Karl Marx’s words (1848/2010): “The immediate aim of the Communists is the same as that of all the other proletariat parties: formation of the proletariat into a class, the overthrow of the bourgeois supremacy, conquest of political power by the proletariat” (p. 35).

Nowadays, however, Western societies and most of the countries of the world still have an economic system based on capitalism. With this, hence, those countries still have a system of classes similar to those that both Marx and Engels denounced in *The Communist Manifesto*. Nonetheless, unlike workers in the 19th century, today’s workers have certain rights. Moreover, child labor and slavery, among others, have also been abolished. According to the International Labor Organization:

The Declaration commits Member States to respect and promote principles and rights in four categories, whether or not they have ratified the relevant Conventions. These categories are: freedom of association and the effective recognition of the right to collective bargaining, the elimination of forced or compulsory labour, the abolition of child labour and the elimination of discrimination in respect of

employment and education. (International Labor Organization, 1998, ILO Declaration on Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work section).

Turning back to the modern system of classes, it is important to mention that society is no longer divided into rich and poor people but rather into different classes depending on how much income a person earns. Therefore, a person may belong to a low, middle, or upper class depending on their income. Nonetheless, Steven E. Barkan in his book *Sociology: Understanding and Changing the Social World* goes further and cites a quote from Lee Rainwater and Richard Coleman's *Social Standing in America: New Dimensions of Class*. Barkan claims that there are "six or seven social classes based on such things as, once again, education, occupation, and income, but also on lifestyle, the schools people's children attend, a family's reputation in the community, how "old" or "new" people's wealth is..." (2016, p. 200).

However, Michael Zweig, the director of the Center for Study of Working Class Life at the State University of New York, does not agree with Barkan in the sense that classes are based on all those things and in *Six Points on Class* claims:

"Class" must be understood in terms of power rather than income, wealth, or life style, although these do vary by class. Using power as the starting point allows us to see class as a dynamic relationship rather than as a static set of characteristics. Investigating class as a question of power also makes it possible to find the organic links among class, race, and gender. Looking at class in terms of income, wealth, life style, or education separates it from race and gender, which are best understood

as power relationships rather than inherent characteristics individuals possess.

(Zweig, 2006, para. 5)

With Zweig's words, hence, one can understand that people should stop relating class to income, as he thinks that class is related to power rather than money or lifestyles. Therefore, class should be related to issues such as gender or race.

Steven E. Barkan, however, in his book *Sociology: Understanding and Changing the Social World* explains that the American Class Structure can be divided into four different categories "based on the percentage of households above or below a specific income level: the upper class, the middle class, the working class, and the lower class" (2016, pp. 184–186). Hence, Barkan disagrees with Michael Zweig's idea that class should not be related to income.

Nonetheless, Michael Zweig, in his book *The Working Class Majority: America's Best Kept Secret* says that "Even though the middle class is only about 35 percent of the workforce, almost every aspect of politics and popular culture, with help from the media, reinforces the idea that "middle class" is the typical and usual status of Americans" (2000, p. 41). Therefore, Michael Zweig believes that a middle class exists too, but that class should not be related to income.

Moreover, after reading Zweig's words, a person may realize that he may be right: almost every person in the world thinks that almost every citizen of the United States of America belongs to the middle class, but to a middle class related to income. In fact, that might be one of the main causes that lead many immigrants to go to The United States:

live a better life with more money to finally achieve the dreams that they could not achieve in their home countries, i.e., pursuing what is known as “the American Dream”.

All these ideas must be taken into consideration when doing a cultural analysis of *The Simpsons* and, to make it clear, this dissertation aims to do a cultural analysis based on class struggle of two episodes of *The Simpsons: Last Exit to Springfield* and *Scenes from the Class Struggle in Springfield*.

2.1. *Last Exit to Springfield*

BOY. You can't treat the working man this way. One day we'll form a union, and get the fair and equitable treatment we deserve. Then we'll go too far, and get corrupt and shiftless, and the Japanese will eat us alive!

MR. BURNS' GRANDFATHER. The Japanese? Those sandal-wearing goldfish tenders? Ha ha! Bosh. Flimshaw.

(Back to present day)

MR. BURNS. If only we had listened to that boy instead of walling him up in the abandoned coke oven.

(Kogen et al., 1993)

This episode – which was first aired on March 11, 1993 – is the episode number 17 of the fourth season of the television show. In this episode, the viewer sees that Montgomery Burns, the owner of the Springfield Nuclear Power Plant, wants to eliminate a few of its workers' rights as he recalls how his grandfather treated his workers. One of those rights

is the dental plan, which until now was approved in the workers' contract. Unfortunately, the Simpson family finds out that one of its members needs braces: Lisa.

Mr. Burns, in an attempt to get the workers to go along with his decision to eliminate the dental plan, finds a strongly opposed Homer since he cannot afford his daughter's braces without the dental plan. All of the workers of the Springfield Nuclear Power Plant agree with Homer and decide to elect him president of the trade union. After this, Mr. Burns tries to bribe Homer, but the latter does not accept Burns' demands and decides to start a strike in the company.

The owner of the company tries to stop the strike through unorthodox methods such as spraying water to the strikers or cutting off the city's power supply. However, all of Mr. Burns' attempts to stop the strike fail and he finally gives in to the worker's demands. Therefore, all workers return to work and Lisa finally gets her braces.

This episode is, therefore, a great satire of how a capitalist system works by showing the struggle between the workers and the employer. In fact, this episode shows perfectly what both Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels denounced in the *Manifesto of the Communist Party* as "class struggle": the workers (the proletariat) struggling against the oppression of Mr. Burns (the bourgeoisie).

Furthermore, the viewer will also notice that the class struggle between Mr. Burns and his workers goes back years. An example of this can be this funny dialogue between Marge and Homer:

MARGE. Homer, Lisa needs braces.

HOMER. Don't worry. We won a dental plan in the strike of '88. That's where I got this scar.

(Flashback to 1988)

CARL. What do we want?

ALL. More equitable treatment in the hands of management!

CARL. When do we want it?

ALL. Soon!

(Camera pans to Homer demanding food from a Joe's Catering food truck)

HOMER. Where's my burrito?! Where's my burrito?! Where's my burrito?! (the food truck door slams on his head) Ow!

(Back to present day)

HOMER. Then I got this scar sneaking under the door of a pay toilet.

(Kogen et al., 1993)

It is important to remark that the Simpson family lives in the United States of America, a country whose vast majority of citizens have always been averse to the ideology of the former Union of Soviet Socialist Republics. With this, hence, the vast majority of the United States citizens are in favor of capitalism ideology despite continuing to have a class struggle between employers and employees.

Nonetheless, what the episode of the television series denounces is precisely that this class struggle is a big problem not only in Springfield – the city where the action takes place – but a problem in the vast majority of capitalist countries. In fact, this

denounce would still be applicable – 29 years after – to the present times since things have not changed that much.

2.2. *Scenes from the Class Struggle in Springfield*

COUNTRY CLUB GATE ATTENDANT. Name, please?

HOMER. Simpson family.

MARGE. We're not poor.

(Crittenden & Dietter, 1996)

This episode – which was first aired on February 4, 1996 – is the episode number 14 of the seventh season of the television show. In this episode, the viewer sees that the Simpson family goes to buy a new TV to Ogdenville – a city where everything is cheaper than in Springfield. In that city, Marge sees a pink Chanel dress for only \$90, something that prompts her to buy it.

Days after, Marge goes to the Kwik-E-Mart with her new Chanel dress and finds Evelyn Peters, a friend from school. Evelyn invites the Simpson family to the Springfield Country Club. Once they go to the Springfield Country Club, they realize that all the members are very rich and that they have snobbish personalities. This leads Marge to modify her Chanel dress so she can have a different look every time she goes to the country club.

Homer, however, spends time playing golf with Mr. Burns, but he soon realizes that Mr. Burns cheats when playing the sport, and as Homer wants to tell everybody the truth,

Burns tells Homer, in the form of a threat, that Marge is happy being part of the club. Homer, therefore, keeps Mr. Burns' secret.

One day, Marge breaks her Chanel dress accidentally and goes back to Ogdenville to buy another dress, but there are none left in the city. Because of this, Marge makes the decision to buy a dress at a Chanel store. Once the Simpson family goes to the country club, Marge realizes how much she has changed by being with the club people and decides not to be part of the club anymore. After this, the family goes to Krusty Burger, a restaurant more suited to their social class.

Following the ideas of the previous episode, this episode also shows the class struggle between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie. Furthermore, the episode also shows what Michael Zweig claims in his book *The Working Class Majority: America's Best Kept Secret*. For example, Michael Zweig claimed that “even though the middle class is only about 35 percent of the workforce, almost every aspect of politics and popular culture, with help from the media, reinforces the idea that “middle class” is the typical and usual status of Americans” (2000, p. 41). In this episode, the viewer sees that the Simpson family belongs to the middle-class as they are neither poor nor rich. In fact, Zweig's words are true as the vast majority of the characters in the television series clearly belong to that social class. However, Marge dreams of being part of the upper-class once she buys the Chanel dress and has the approval of the people of that class. In fact, Marge changes her behavior unconsciously as she does not want to accept that she belongs to the middle-class. An example of this is the conversation between her and Lisa:

LISA. The rich are different from you and me

MARGE. Yes, they're better. Socially better, and if we fit in we can be better too.

(Crittenden & Dietter, 1996)

This is precisely what this episode denounces: the different types of social classes that coexist in the United States of America and how low and middle-class people try to be part of the upper-class or, at least, somehow think they are part of that class. This is something that, like the previous topic, continues to occur in current times.

3. Ecocriticism on *The Simpsons*

Ecocriticism helps human beings to have a broader view of nature. It urges humans to have a biocentric view despite their apparently incorrigible anthropocentrism due to their selfish nature. (Suresh Frederick, 2006, pp. 135-136)

Prior to talking about ecocriticism, it is important to know what that term means. Therefore, it is essential to mention the definition that William Rueckert, the man who coined the term, gave in his essay “Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism”. In Rueckert’s words:

I am going to experiment with the application of ecology and ecological concepts to the study of literature, because ecology (as a science, as a discipline, as the basis for a human vision) has the greatest relevance to the present and future of the world we all live in of anything that I have studied in recent years. (1978, p. 73).

Therefore, if ecocriticism is a way of studying literature, how can it relate to multimedia services? Remember that this dissertation aims to do a cultural analysis on ecocriticism of two episodes of a television series, and more precisely of *The Simpsons*. According to Adrian Ivakhiv in his *Green Film Criticism and Its Futures*:

As ecocriticism develops in scope and in influence, it is spreading beyond its original home in literary studies and colonizing new niches in related fields. Among these is film criticism. Many ecocritics have taken an interest in film and visual media: there have, for instance, been a number of discussions on the ASLE listserv

about environmental films, and several courses in environmental literature include screenings of films. (2008, p. 1)

Hence, following Ivakhiv's words, a person discovers that ecocriticism can also be related to movies and multimedia services because many ecocritics began to take interest in the multimedia services field. In fact, Adrian Ivakhiv (2008) mentions that this type of ecocriticism is called "green film criticism, or eco-cinecriticism". In his article titled "Green Film Criticism and Its Futures" he says: "This article will review the main directions and achievements of ecologically minded film criticism to date and will suggest some as-yet-underexplored strategies for a green film criticism, or *eco-cinecriticism*" (Ivakhiv, 2008, p. 1).

It is also important to mention that ecocriticism is closely linked to Marxist theory. In fact, Sandip Kumar Mishra, an associate professor at Jawaharlal Nehru University, in his "Ecocriticism: A Study of Environmental Issues in Literature" claims that:

Ecocriticism as an Interdisciplinary Approach: Ecocriticism is an intentionally broad approach which is by its very nature interdisciplinary. It draws its sustenance from the existing literary theories. All sciences come forward to contribute to the field. Therefore, new theories like Post-colonial Ecocriticism, Ecofeminism, Ecomarxism, Ecospiritualism are coming into light. (2016, p.169)

From Sandip Kumar Mishra's words, therefore, one confirms that eco-Marxism – a way of thinking which is linked to Marxist theory and ecology – was born as a new

theory in the wake of ecocriticism and hence, ecocriticism is closely linked to Marxist theory.

In fact, Michael Malay, a writer whose main works are on environmental literature, claimed on his article titled “Raymond Williams and Ecocriticism”: “Just as biodiversity can be a good indicator of environmental strength, the increasing complexity of ecocriticism (and its subvariants of ecofeminism, eco-Marxism, ecotheology) points towards organic intellectual growth” (2014, p.13). Therefore, Michael Malay also confirms that eco-Marxism and ecocriticism are closely linked since eco-Marxism is a subvariant of ecocriticism.

Having said that, this dissertation aims to make a cultural analysis of an episode of *The Simpsons* taking into account ecocritical aspects. This episode is *Two Cars in Every Garage and Three Eyes on Every Fish*.

3.1. Two Cars in Every Garage and Three Eyes on Every Fish

MARGE. Well, leave it to good ‘ol Mary Bailey to finally step in and do something about that hideous genetic mutation.

HOMER. (scoffs) Mary Bailey! Well, if I was governor I’d sure find better things to do with my time.

MARGE. Like what?

HOMER. Like getting Washington's birthday and Lincoln's birthday back as separate paid holidays. President's Day... Pfft! What a rip-off. I bust my butt day in and day out...

(Simon et al., 1990)

This episode – which was first aired on November 1, 1990 – is the episode number four of the second season of the television show. In this episode, the viewer sees that both Lisa and Bart Simpson go fishing near the Springfield Nuclear Plant and just as Bart fishes a three-eyed fish, a reporter named Dave Shutton arrives. Mr. Shutton is responsible of making the three-eyed fish go viral, something that makes Governor Mary Bailey to send an inspection to the nuclear plant. The inspection concludes that Mr. Burns violates 342 regulations, something that can lead to the closure of the plant. Nonetheless, Homer aims Mr. Burns to run for governor so he can still have the nuclear plant open.

Although Mr. Burns begins to be hated by everyone, he soon begins to become more and more popular to the point that, in the polls, his campaign is tied with Mary Bailey's. To make his campaign more popular, Mr. Burns decides to have dinner with one of his employees and their family. That employee ends up being Homer, and so Mr. Burns has dinner with the Simpson family. Nonetheless, the family is divided between those against and those in favor of Mr. Burns' candidacy. Those against are Marge and Lisa while the only one in favor of his candidacy is Homer.

During dinner, Marge serves a three-eyed fish to Mr. Burns. However, he is unable of eat it, something that causes Mr. Burns' bid for governor to fail, and Mary Bailey wins the election. This episode, therefore, shows one of the big problems that the United States of America continues to face: pollution.

In this episode, each character has a different relationship with the environment, or at least, there are three main groups among the citizens of Springfield: those who do not care about pollution, those who do care about pollution, and those who do not care whether someone is polluting the environment or not. Thus, an example of someone who does not care about pollution is Montgomery Burns, an example of someone who does care about pollution is Lisa Simpson, and an example of someone that does not care whether someone is polluting the environment is Homer Simpson.

In fact, Mr. Burns destroys Springfield's ecosystem for his own profit. He does not mind destroying the city – ecologically speaking – as long as he makes a lot of money. An example of this can be the dialogue between Mr. Burns and the Inspector:

INSPECTOR. Mr. Burns, in 20 years I have never seen such a shoddy, deplorable...

MR. BURNS. Oh, look. Some careless person has left thousands and thousands of dollars just lying here on my coffee table. Smithers, why don't we leave the room and hopefully, when we return, the pile of money will be gone. (Groaning). (Grunts) Look, Smithers, the money and a very stupid man are still here.

INSPECTOR. Burns, if I didn't know better, I'd think you were trying to bribe me.

MR. BURNS. Is there some confusion about this? Take it, take it, take it, you poor schmo.

INSPECTOR. Mr. Burns. I'm going to overlook this felony. However, I will not overlook the 342 violations I have observed at your plant today. Either bring this place up to code or we'll shut it down. Good day.

(Simon et al., 1990)

This can be an example of how Marxist theory and ecocriticism relate to each other since both the employees and the employer do not mind polluting the ecosystem as long as they keep their jobs and keep making money, respectively. Therefore, the paradigm arises here: is it necessary to destroy the Earth to have a good economy? Springfield, the United States of America, and the whole world do not seem to have found an answer yet.

4. Postcolonialism on *The Simpsons*

Has not the country become independent? Have we not become free men in our own country? Be sure, though, that they will direct our affairs from afar. This is because they have left behind them people who think as they do. (Salih, 2009, p. 101)

According to Duncan Ivison (2020), postcolonialism is defined as “the historical period or state of affairs representing the aftermath of Western colonialism”.

However, Edward Wadie Said published a book in 1978 titled *Orientalism* that set some of the key ideas which are now considered the foundation of post-colonial theory. Edward Said claimed in *Orientalism*: “Idea, cultures and histories cannot seriously be understood or studied without their force, or more precisely their configurations of power, also being studied” (1978, p. 5). This means that if a group of a certain society is more powerful than others in terms of politics or economy, this group will also be more powerful when it comes to decide the culture of the society in which both groups live together. With this, therefore, from Said’s *Orientalism* one understands that Western countries have represented Eastern societies in a way that was useful for their own profit.

In fact, Edward Said’s intentions in *Orientalism* were to demonstrate how the West – a term used by Said to refer to Western societies – has a view of Eastern societies full of prejudices. According to the words of the writer and academic Namrata Verghese in “What is Orientalism? A Stereotyped, Colonialist Vision of Asian Cultures”: “The term

Orientalism, coined by scholar Edward Said, refers to the racist, sexualized, commodified way the West discusses Eastern cultures” (2021).

Even though *Orientalism* focuses mainly on the prejudices of the West world against the Eastern world, these types of prejudices can be applied to any other countries that have been oppressed or are considered as exotic by Western countries. In fact, a television viewer – that does not have prejudices against other countries and its people – can notice this in the television series that it is being analyzed in this dissertation, i.e., *The Simpsons*, with characters like Apu Nahasapeemapetilon or Bumblebee Man.

Orientalism begins with a quote by Karl Marx: “They cannot represent themselves; they must be represented” (Said, 1978, p. xii). With this quote, the reader of Said’s book may come to ask themselves: is postcolonialism related to Marxist theory? Bart Moore-Gilbert, a British academic famous for his work on postcolonial theory, wrote some key ideas on his article titled “Marxism and Postcolonialism Reconsidered”. In Moore-Gilbert’s words: “It was not until the publication of Aijaz Ahmad’s *In Theory* (1992) that a systematic critique of postcolonialism’s politics, methodologies, and objects of study from a Marxist perspective became available” (Moore-Gilbert, 2001, p. 9). With this, therefore, one realizes that some academics began to study postcolonialism from a Marxist lens once Aijaz Ahmad wrote a critique of postcolonialism in 1992 under the name of *In Theory*. Hence, postcolonialism and Marxist theory can be related to each other.

One example that can be attributed to postcolonialism is something that has already been mentioned in the dissertation which is what is known as “the American Dream”.

Some citizens of The United States still believe that their country is some sort of utopia where everyone can achieve the dreams that people did not achieve in their home countries. Therefore, some people emphasize the idea that Western societies – and more precisely The United States – are more powerful than Eastern societies. Unfortunately, this can lead to racist behavior as some citizens of The United States consider that they are superior to those who arrive from Eastern countries and that those immigrants are somehow “stealing” their jobs. Hence, “the American Dream” can be considered as an oxymoron as some American people boast that their country is superior as everyone can get their dreams come true, but those same citizens refuse to allow others to fulfill their dreams simply because they were born or come from another country that they consider inferior. However, a lot of immigrants still struggling to get a job and establish a new life in The United States, and, sadly, enduring racist remarks and acts from some citizens.

These ideas must be taken into consideration when doing a cultural analysis based on postcolonialism on *The Simpsons*. In fact, this dissertation aims to do a cultural analysis based on postcolonialism of the episode *Much Apu About Nothing*.

4.1. Much Apu About Nothing

LISA. You know, Apu, in a way, all Americans are immigrants, except Native Americans.

HOMER. Yeah. Native Americans like us.

LISA. No, I mean American Indians.

APU. Like me.

LISA. No, I mean...

(Cohen & Dietter, 1996)

This episode – which was first aired on May 5, 1996 – is the episode number 23 of the seventh season of the television show. In this episode, the viewer finds that the citizens of Springfield are demanding more security after a bear appears on the city streets. In response, Quimby, the mayor of Springfield, raises taxes to deploy a new patrol. However, the citizens do not approve this increase and Quimby, to protect himself, blames illegal immigrants for the increase. In fact, Quimby declares “Proposition 24” – a new proposition that can deport any illegal immigrant living in Springfield.

The consequences of Proposition 24 are not long in coming, as all the immigrants in the city begin to be persecuted. Apu Nahasapeemapetilon, the owner of the Kwik-E-Mart, visits Fat Tony to get a fake visa, but in the end, Apu ends up destroying it as he feels guilty for doing something wrong. The Simpson family sees Apu sad, so they want to help him by passing a citizenship test, which he eventually passes.

To celebrate Apu’s passing, the Simpsons throw a party and Homer takes the opportunity to say that Proposition 24 should not pass, but, in fact, Proposition 24 is enacted with Willie being the only deported immigrant in the place.

This episode, hence, represents postcolonialism through the character of Apu Nahasapeemapetilon. Apu, a character of Indian descent, represents most of the clichés that Western societies have towards people of that country. In fact, this is something that Edward Said mentions in his book *Orientalism*: the prejudiced view that citizens of Western countries have towards citizens of Eastern countries. Indian Americans are,

indeed, a minority in the United States of America, something that makes them unusual for Americans and therefore creates those prejudices.

This episode even satires how the characters that consider themselves “truly Americans” cannot even speak proper Standard English. An example of this can be the dialogue between Moe, Homer, and Barney:

MOE. You know what really *aggravates* me? Is them *immigrants*. They want all the benefits of living in Springfield, but they ain't even bothered to learn themselves the language.

HOMER. Yeah. Those are exactly my *sentimonies*.

BARNEY. (*Babbling incoherently*)

MOE. Yeah, you said it, Barn.

(Cohen & Dietter, 1996)

The viewer will also see how Apu, an immigrant that is struggling to have the American nationality, knows more history of the United States of America than Homer, an American white man that already has the nationality just for being born in the country. An example of this is the dialogue between Homer and Apu:

HOMER. Please identify this object.

APU. It appears to be the flag which disappeared from the public library last year.

HOMER. Correct. Now, we all know the 13 stripes are for good luck, but why does the American flag have precisely 47 stars?

APU. Because this particular flag is ridiculously out of date. The library must have purchased it during the brief period in 1912 after New Mexico became a state but before Arizona did.

HOMER. Uh, partial credit.

(Cohen & Dietter, 1996)

This can be interpreted as a satire of how an immigrant knows more about the country of a person that is prejudiced towards that immigrant and already has the nationality. In fact, people who are prejudiced towards immigrants often refer to the “American Dream” to claim that the United States of America is the best country to live in and that makes a lot of immigrants want to go.

Finally, after many viewers of the television series have lambasted the character of Apu for many years, the voice actor of the character – Hank Azaria – resigned from continuing to voice Apu because he felt guilty for it. In Azaria’s words:

I really do apologise. I know you weren't asking for that but it's important. I apologise for my part in creating that and participating in that. Part of me feels I need to go round to every single Indian person in this country and apologise. (BBC News, 2021)

5. Materialist Feminism on *The Simpsons*

The women's movement has forced the political as well as the intellectual world to recognize that housework is work, and exploited work at that. Leftists can no longer pretend to restrict women's oppression to the superstructural, to 'backward thinking'. As soon as the threat became inescapable they resolved to invade the discussion of domestic labour in a last attempt to preserve it from feminism. Not being allowed to say any longer that domestic labour was 'superstructural' or 'non-existent', they tried to 'prove' that it benefitted capitalism. (Delphy, 1980, p.99)

According to Martha E. Giménez, Professor Emeritus of Sociology at the University of Colorado Boulder:

In the heady days of the Women's Liberation Movement, it was possible to identify four main currents within feminist thought: Liberal (concerned with attaining economic and political equality within the context of capitalism); Radical (focused on men and patriarchy as the main causes of the oppression of women); Socialist (critical of capitalism and Marxism, so much so that avoidance of Marxism's alleged reductionisms resulted in dual systems theories postulating various forms of interaction between capitalism and patriarchy); and Marxist Feminism (a theoretical position held by relatively few feminists in the USA – myself included – which sought to develop the potential of Marxist theory to understand the capitalist sources of the oppression of women). (2000, p. 18)

After reading the introduction to Giménez's "What's Material About Materialist Feminism? A Marxist Feminist Critique", a person may come to wonder where the term "materialist feminism" comes from then. Rosemary Hennessy, an American academic, gives an answer to that question in her book *Materialist Feminism and the Politics of Discourse*. In Hennessy's words (1998):

In the late 1970s materialist feminism emerged from feminist critiques within Marxism. Working in critical engagement with the formation of the New Left in Britain and France especially, materialist feminist work contributed to the development of theories of patriarchy and ideology, elaborating more specific understandings of the relation between the operation of power in the symbolic order and in other material practices. Annette Kuhn, Anne Marie Wolpe, Michele Barrett, Mary Macintosh, and Christine Delphy were among the initial promoters of "materialist feminism", favoring that term over "Marxist feminism" on the basis of an argument that Marxism cannot adequately address women's exploitation and oppression unless the Marxist problematic itself is transformed so as to be able to account for the sexual division of labor. (pp. xi-xii).

With this, hence, Rosemary Hennessy shows that "materialist feminism" derives from the initial ideology of Marxist feminism, but over time, some Marxist feminists thought that the kind of feminism they advocated did not take into consideration the differences between men and women at work, so they developed a new type of feminism: the materialist feminism.

Lisa Vogel, an American feminist sociologist and art historian, in her book *Essays for a Materialist Feminism* provides another example of how materialist feminism developed. According to Vogel:

Wishing both to invoke Marxism and to maintain our distance, we deployed the term [materialist] to signal the key role, mediated and determinant only in the last instance, of human labor and material processes - most especially those carried out primarily by women and previously invisible to theory. (1995, p. xii)

From Vogel's words, one may end up thinking that the best example of a job conducted principally by women is, unfortunately, domestic labor. Domestic labor has always been a job that, despite being essential for our daily lives, can become enslaving in certain cases as a woman may not have a job (and therefore cannot have an income) because she has to take care of the house and her family. This example shows perfectly what Lise Vogel wanted to say with "human labor . . . carried out primarily by women and previously invisible to theory" (1995, p. xii).

Furthermore, since what materialist feminism denounces that the oppression of women is due to both patriarchy and capitalism, one must take into account other examples of women oppression that materialist feminism denounces. For example, thinking that girls must play with toys that are considered for them, such as dolls or toy kitchens; and boys must play with toys that are considered for them, like soccer balls or toy guns. These examples show perfectly how patriarchal society and capitalism force girls to learn to "cook" and take care of their "children" from a very young age, i.e., both patriarchy and capitalism force gender roles.

Elizabeth Sweet, a professor in Sociology and Interdisciplinary Social Sciences at San Jose State University, claims in her article titled “Guys and Dolls No More?” that “there are several reasons gender-based marketing has become so prevalent. On a practical level, toy makers know that by segmenting the market into narrow demographic groups, they can sell more versions of the same toy” (Sweet, 2012). With this, hence, one realizes that, in most cases, toys are gender-based due to marketing reasons, and therefore, to capitalism.

All these ideas must be taken into consideration when doing a cultural analysis of *The Simpsons* since, as with the previous topics, the television series also takes this topic to denounce injustices not only in The United States of America but in the whole world – in this case, gender inequality.

To make it clear, this dissertation aims to do a cultural analysis based on materialist feminism of an episode of *The Simpsons* titled *Lisa vs. Malibu Stacy*.

5.1. Lisa vs. Malibu Stacy

MALIBU STACY. Let's buy makeup, so the boys will like us!

GIRLS. (Chattering)

LISA. (Groaning) Don't you people see anything wrong what Malibu Stacy says?

CELESTE. Oh, there's something wrong with what my Stacy says.

MALIBU STACY. (Male voice) My Spidey sense is tingling. Anybody call for a web-slinger?

LISA. No, Celeste. I mean, the things she says are sexist.

GIRLS. (All giggling) Lisa said a dirty word!

(Oakley et al., 1994)

This episode – which was first aired on October 15, 1992 – is the episode number 14 of the fifth season of the television show. In this episode, the viewer sees that, as Abe Simpson, Homer’s father, feels he is dying, he gives the inheritance to the family before he finally dies.

With the inherited money, Lisa buys the new Malibu Stacy talking doll, but soon regrets it as Lisa does not like to hear the doll say sexist comments, something that leads her to look for Stacy Lovell, the doll’s creator. Nonetheless, once she finds Stacy Lovell, Lisa discovers that the creator of the doll has not work for the company since 1974, but both Lisa and Stacy agree to create a new talking doll designed to inspire young girls: Lisa Lionheart.

The new doll gets great popularity while Malibu Stacy’s sales decline, something that causes the Stacy Malibu company to create a new doll. The new Malibu Stacy, unfortunately for Lisa, attracts the attention of all the buyers who wanted the Lisa Lionheart doll in the first place, resulting in the Lisa Lionheart doll not being bought by anyone except one girl who prefers Lisa Lionheart to Malibu Stacy. Finally, Lisa is happy that at least one little girl is happy with Lisa Lionheart, but Stacy Lovell is not so happy because she lost \$46,000 creating the doll.

Therefore, the viewer will realize that this episode talks about feminism, and more precisely materialist feminism.

In the episode, Malibu Stacy pretends to be what little girls should be but, in reality, this is just the point of view of some executives who do not care about the oppression of women and continue to manufacture this kind of dolls just to keep making money from them. Therefore, it can be said that the oppression of women occurs in this situation due to capitalism.

Moreover, “patriarchy” is another term to keep in mind when discussing this episode. As mentioned before, Malibu Stacy has been created to look like the ideal type of girl, but in reality, the doll is nothing more than a sexist toy made primarily by men. An example of this can be when Lisa realizes that the new talking doll only says sexist comments when she pulls Malibu Stacy’s cord and Bart finds nothing strange in those comments:

MALIBU STACY. I wish they taught shopping in school!

LISA. Ohh.

MALIBU STACY. Let's bake some cookies for the boys!

LISA. Come on, Stacy. I've waited my whole life to hear you speak. Don't you have anything relevant to say?

MALIBU STACY. Don't ask me. I'm just a girl! (giggles)

BART. Right on! Say it, sister.

LISA. It's not funny, Bart. Millions of girls will grow up thinking that this is the right way to act. That they can never be anything more than vacuous ninnies whose

only goal is to look pretty, land a rich husband, and spend all day on the phone with their equally vacuous friends talking about how damn terrific it is to look pretty and have a rich husband!

(Oakley et al., 1994)

Therefore, what the creators of Malibu Stacy do is to force gender roles by having the doll say that women should cook for boys and that they must always look pretty, among other things. In fact, Lisa's intention in creating Lisa Lionheart was precisely to eradicate those gender roles by making a doll that can serve as an inspiration to young girls.

6. Conclusion

After analyzing some episodes of *The Simpsons* on some aspects of cultural materialism that deal with class struggle, ecocriticism, postcolonialism, and materialist feminism in American society, it is demonstrated that, despite having been silenced throughout history, some aspects of ecology, postcolonialism, and materialist feminism are represented in the television series. For instance, *The Simpsons* is one of the few television series that denounced and still denounces global pollution and how patriarchy is present in today's society through toys such as Malibu Stacy – a parody of the Barbie doll.

Moreover, it is also shown that this television series allows the viewer to see some ways in which the productive process of the television series has affected the characters present in it and, therefore, the meanings that the television series emits. For example, the character Apu Nahasapeemapetilon is no longer in the television series as many viewers considered the character to be offensive towards people of Indian origin, something that makes the television series emit a non-racist message.

It is true, however, that an American person – or even a person from a Western country – may not understand these contexts in a better way than a person from another country since their country has never been under the occupation of a different country.

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