



Entitlement over the Working Woman in *Severance*

Ling Ma's *Severance* goes into a number of themes that parallel modern life – capitalism, illness, patriarchy, and the working modern world's ever-increasing flaws. The methods in which Ling Ma explores these real world issues vary from a more literal take, to viewing them through the lense of metaphor and subtlety. Though the book is a post-apocalyptic dystopian novel, Candace is an extremely relatable protagonist who represents the modern worker under the stresses of American capitalism and a patriarchal society.

At the prologue of the story, Candace narrates the beginning of the group and their initial actions as though she herself were with them. However, at that time, she hadn't been; this was before the total collapse of infrastructure had forced her out of her workplace and out into the world. Despite being fully able to consider the group separate from herself, especially before she was there and especially in the privacy of her own mind, she chooses not to. This places Candace immediately as a person who, like most, prefers being in a group category. Over history, people have consistently placed themselves in "us versus them" mindsets, and the workforce has increased this competitive nature. Candace herself at one point thinks about how she would rather be with the "art group" of her company rather than her place facilitating the production of Bibles. "Everyone wanted to be an Art Girl. I wanted to be an Art Girl. (Ling Ma 56)" Candace is a more naturally social person and works best as a communicator. In her original job her routine revolves around answering emails, solving problems, and making calls – this is a role that allows Candace to engage with others on a surface level as well as giving her a stable routine system. Even when she flees from the group for the last time, she still tries to get

another woman to leave along with her. While she may not get along with most during in-depth social situations – her presence with people may be more related to the fact that there must be people around /in order/ for her to have someone to be useful to - she is not someone who wants to be fully disconnected from others. The job she takes up in the absence of her original is social in nature; she visits places expressly to keep them alive on the internet. This fact of her may stem from Candace's desire to be "useful" - something instilled into her by her mother's last words. Candace is a person who *needs* to be useful as a core part of her identity. However, it is this need that is exploited by others, and this is the method in which the book explores the topic of production and the mistreatment of workers. While many site the worker that wants more just treatment as being "lazy," this is untrue; Candace is the portrayal of a worker who is dedicated to nothing but her job. This does not mean that she deserves to be taken advantage of by corporate greed, and Ling Ma is aware of this. The first chapter explores the exploitation of workers who are being pushed to labor in mines under dangerous conditions and are dying for it – this is the thing that causes the fever, and by extension, the downfall of society as a whole. This invites us to look at current capitalism and western practices critically; though the apocalypse that occurs is fiction, the death and illness caused by the unfair labor practices of western corporation is *real*. People still die directly from the conditions they are forced into – while *Severance* shows this to an extreme, it still remains a reminder of the things that occur in the real world. It is also common for western corporations to specifically exploit *Asian* countries, as oftentimes labor laws and workers' rights are fewer and weaker in these areas. The people doing the work don't matter; it is the work being done that is important to these corporations.

Bob's role in the group is as the leader, the representation of capitalism, and the representation of religiously based control. He acts as a sort of parallel to Candace's character – Candace's ties to religion relate to the production of the Bibles that she doesn't use. Bob, in contrast, is the person who delegates production and makes use of her labor and product. He justifies his actions against Candace as

being his “right” to do so, and claims he is doing the right thing simply because he was “chosen by God”. On a larger scale, men in power often justify that power and other unfair dynamics with the excuses of religion. This is further apparent when the conversation is turned to focus on women’s rights to reproduce under their own terms. When something is viewed as “evil,” the religious man feels entitled to its destruction; when something is viewed as “holy,” the religious man feels entitled to ownership over it. This book also subtly displays how men get into roles of power, even if women – especially non-white women – are more suited to the position. Bob is placed into the role of delegator solely for his “work in IT (Ling Ma 8)” - and even when Candace joins them, this doesn’t change once throughout their time together. Candace is a person whose life revolved solely around delegation of tasks and managing resources and people, and it was something that she had excelled at. This is a dynamic that appears often in the real world, where women are pushed into jobs that they are overqualified for.

Candace herself takes on a religious framework on occasion, even referring to the group’s original meeting as “The Beginning.” While she herself does not describe herself as religious, she does work primarily with Bibles, which may explain her sometimes religious considerations. Her recurring dream surrounding the book takes a more metaphorical look at her mental state. “Finally, I end up in an empty room where it looks like there are no other doors. I can hear the din of voices, balloons popping, laughter scattering wildly like dice across tile. The sounds seem to emanate from one wall. At the foot of that wall is a tiny doorway, fit for a cartoon mouse. I get on the ground and squeeze myself through, but my hips don’t fit. (Ling Ma 387)” Candace, in the past, has felt the very situation Bob later places her into. She’s isolated from others, just close enough to understand what others are doing and where, but she isn’t able to reach them. Her isolation is in part caused by the Bibles she has been put in charge of producing – and in this dream she is able to see her family and the people she knows, while being trapped by her place of work. The dream ends with a bowl of shark fin soup, a dish infamous for the way sharks are left to die in order to make it. She acknowledges this with the justification that it is due to

how “unbelievably rich” it is. This dream illustrates how she feels trapped by her work, yet also how she is part of the process that is harming the workers that she knows are dying in Asia. She consumes the production of others just as Bob later takes advantage of her, first by telling her what to do regardless of what she wants and later by literally trapping her.

Bob delegates work to the other members without directly contributing to the group on his own. His “Facility” is in truth a mall, and the resources in which were made by those who worked to make them. He is someone who, fundamentally, feels entitled to the work that others do. Candace’s independence is both a good and bad thing for him. She is focused largely on being “useful” due to her mother – but the way Bob wants her to be “useful” directly conflicts Candace’s other primary motivation that being her child, as well as her desire to have a set routine and tasks to complete. Here, Candace chooses the freedom of herself and Luna – and later enters a physical altercation with a fevered Bob. While in this state of frenzy, there is a line that seems unrelated to them - “You have done a tremendous, tremendous job, Michael Reitman says (Ling Ma 783)”. This is a line that can be interpreted in a number of ways; it is a callback to a conversation Candace has with another man in charge of her, who, like Bob, gives her an “offer” - instead of transferring to her choice of the Art department, she is pushed into a more indefinite position in the Bible manufacturing area she was already trapped in, only with a better pay. This callback puts emphasis on the parallels between Bob and her employers as well as showing where Candace’s mental state is at in this moment. She has been trapped repeatedly by the people over her, and she is for the first time pushing back against that in a way that is not subtle, or easily missed. She is violent and forceful and unapologetic. Despite being somewhat unaware of herself in this moment, not even realizing at first when she laughs in response to Adam, she still takes the time to attempt to bring Rachel along with her; although she may have been able to leave faster without attempting to, and although Rachel had somewhat caved to Bob’s orders, Candace still recognizes her as

an equal in a bad situation and tries to help her, as one of the few people who aren't fevered and who aren't attempting to control her.

The fevered themselves partially represent the working people and the result that routine and dehumanization has. Many fevered become stuck doing their job, such as the lady Candace photographs, or the taxi driver, Eddie. Bob simply chooses not to view them as human beings, and forces Candace and the rest of the group to kill them regardless of their own views and reservations. Though Candace treats the fevered better than Bob, even she is not guiltless with treating them badly – though she is aware of this. When she pulls Eddie out of his own cab, she acknowledges that he may have been aware of her, that he may have been trying to help her, and that she had only thought about herself and where she needed to go. This reflects the harsh system that workers operate under in reality – many popular union busting tactics rely on turning the workers against each other, and often “climbing the corporate ladder” means pushing other people down to get there – to get where one needs to go. Candace is able to be cognizant of this where Bob remains in stubborn privileged ignorance. Though Candace is a person who wants to be productive, she is not one that actively wants to hurt others to be so.

Productivity in *Severance* is a theme that is explored in this book in different ways. Candace is a working woman, as was her mother – there are also themes of specifically *reproduction*. Candace is a pregnant woman, and in the apocalypse, life is rare. Candace's pregnancy when discovered by Bob is immediately something that he tries to control; this directly mirrors the real world, as women's reproductive rights are constantly under attack by men in power. Feminism and misogyny are used in *Severance* as a tool of capitalism and control. The similarities between how men desire control women's bodies and how corporations control workers are explored in ways that are both overt at times and subtle at others. Candace is at the intersection of both womanhood and the working class – she has a baby she did not plan for, and Bob attempts to establish control over her and her child. This is not

something exclusive to Bob himself; another character, Evan, immediately suggests to tell Bob about the pregnancy after Candace informs him of it. This is specifically to “get on his good side” - Bob controls the group, what they do, and whatever resources they accrue. The option presented to Candace in regard to telling Bob about the baby or not is shown to her as just that – an option. However, if she chooses not to, she has no way of getting any resources or assistance for her or her baby. This is the same choice that workers today are given – people are expected to get a job, and the more dangerous occupations are presented are “optional”. People are required to work in these positions if they are the only ones available, or risk losing food or housing. The choice Candace has puts her in a similar situation – placing Bob in a position of power and control over her is the only real option that she has.

In contrast, Candace’s unborn child Luna is of course not someone who understands the capitalist workforce. Luna is representative of both Chinese and American culture and is also representative of a possible life away from the oppression that corporate control inflicts onto the working class. In some ways she parallels Candace’s mother – Luna is most active at night, as is Candace’s visions of her then deceased mother. While her mother motivates Candace to be productive, it is Luna who gives that productivity more of a purpose and future than the routine of work with no reward that Candace had fallen into at the start of the plague. Luna represents Candace’s possible future, of someone who can balance her need to be productive with her other needs as a person, rather than mindlessly working for a corporation until her death. Luna is not in a world where productivity is established and expected, and she is not under the control of another human being. The story doesn’t show exactly what happens to her, but regardless of what occurs post-story it will not be the result of outside, unjust forces. Candace is able to regain control over her life, while Luna assumedly will not experience the same dynamics Candace had at all. In the religious sense, Luna is a form of “rebirth” for humans. Bob wants her to control her, just as he does Candace – Candace, however, only wants Luna’s freedom to choose. Candace sees Luna as the human that she is rather than Bob’s view of productivity

and his own position in the world he lives in, his own view of himself above other people, especially when there are few people left to be around.

In the setting that *Severance* takes place in, the human populace has been extremely reduced, possibly down to solely the small number shown in the book. This elimination more strongly shows the roles people have conditioned themselves to be in; Bob, for example, takes up the iron-handed leadership role, while Candace is forced into the role of a “helpless” pregnant woman whose purpose – of which is designated by Bob - is to be reproductive and stationary. Women are both literally and metaphorically not allowed to move beyond where they already stand – Candace is not allowed to become more than a woman with a baby and is literally confined to a place of work for the sole purpose of having that child by the man who appointed himself to be above her. For her specifically, this is an exceedingly mind-numbing situation. She is not allowed to take her need to be useful and productive into her own hands; while the group sticks together and is designated tasks – something she excels in – she is isolated and stationary. Candace, when allowed to choose her occupation, chose to put herself in a position of movement and direct usefulness. Her photography blog resurged after she noticed a gap that needed to be filled. People wanted to see how various places in New York were surviving (or rather, not surviving) after the plague, and she was able to form a routine around visiting these places and fulfilling that need for people. In contrast to this routine of movement, Bob traps her – literally and figuratively.

While in isolation, Candace attempts to create a routine for herself. The only coping mechanism she has is to “partition it into digestible packets (Ling Ma 626)” - she pushes herself into a routine to escape the reality surrounding her. In the real world, a routine can be comforting to a human at times and detrimental to others – more specifically, routine in the workplace has been documented as something that can be detrimental. As research has discovered, uninterrupted routines in a workplace environment can lead to a variety of negative effects; stress, boredom, low happiness, and worse

performance overall. Candace's boredom and situation is further agitated by the group as a whole. While she is trapped, she is able to see what happens outside her limited viewpoint with extremely minimal interaction from others, even going without conversation. It is because of Bob's specific instruction that she is isolated to such a degree; this sort of jail cell is an isolative experience that many workers experience. The capitalist system has been described as promoting disconnection from one another and oneself as workers. This disconnection is able to keep workers from fully bonding with one another and forming unions in favor of their own rights as people; this is an extreme problem in American capitalism, as America is a place where unions are less protected than other countries, and as such are much fewer in number.

Another consequence of long-term boredom in the workplace is anger and hostility. Candace's resentment towards her life under the control of others has been able to build, and this unjust isolation degrades her mental health severely. This is part of what leads her to attack Bob when presented with the opportunity; despite his control over the group and all of their actions, and despite his deep aversion to the fevered and his unwillingness to see them as human, he himself had become fevered. Directly after this altercation Adam attempts to gain control over the situation; "his incredulous expression quickly reassembles, neutralizes into one that's controlled, authoritative. (Ling Ma 785)" He speaks to her "as if speaking to a child (Ling Ma 785)" - immediately after attempting to take her freedom from Bob, another man of the group attempts to take control over her.

Severance is a story that encourages the reader to consider the modern working life critically, with appreciation for the way it affects workers and the possible future the current state of the capitalism-based lifestyle may lead to. The book closes with a hopeful tone in Candace's voice; however, we as readers are not privy to what happens to her or her baby. This reflects our own sense of entitlement to Candace's story, to Candace herself – we don't deserve the knowledge of what happens to her any more than Bob does, or any more than her exploiters do. This ending takes that sense of

entitlement out of our hands just as Candace takes the keys out of Bob's. Ling Ma has not answered any interviews about this story, and so no readers are able to know what happens to the two of them after the ending. No matter what happens to Candace, good or bad, it is not something that anyone outside of her will be entitled to. No consumer is entitled to anything of others, no matter what position that person is in.

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