

IDEOLOGY AND LITERATURE

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To define ideology is simply to attempt a Herculean task. Marx and Engels defined it in *The German Ideology* as a theory—a cluster of ruling ideas—that is out of touch with the real process of history. The ruling ideas of an epoch, according to them, “are nothing more than the ideal expression of the dominant material relationships, the dominant material relationships grasped as ideas.” These ideas are used as silken threads to weave a blanket of illusion intended to cover up the real face of history. These ideas, as a whole, legitimize the ways a dominant and so-called sanctimonious elite cynically exploits the peasants and the labouring classes.

An ideology can be so all-embracing that escaping from it by looking at ‘real active men is not that easy. The ideas of the ruling class are imposed both by force and also through the imposition of these ideas on to those ruled. In *The German Ideology* Marx has clarified this point :

The ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas, i.e. the class which is the *ruling material* force of society is at the same time its ruling *intellectual force*. The class which has the means of material production at its disposal, has control at the same time over means of mental production so that thereby, generally speaking, the ideas of those who lack the means of mental production are subject to it. (emphases authors’) (p. 64)

Elaborating on this point French Marxist philosopher Louis Althusser has argued in his essay “*Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses*” (1969, first published in English in 1971) that a mass consensus has been produced either by Ideological State Apparatuses (ISAs) or by Repressive State Apparatuses (RSAs) or by both. He maintains that literature as a semi-autonomous institution acts as an ISA in order to justify, propagate and promulgate the status quo of the dominant ideology of an age. Althusser has however, unfortunately, downplayed the question of resistance to ideology in his thesis.

Viewed from all the perspectives discussed above, an individual writer is therefore not a thinking being who reveals *truths* to people through her/his writing but the one who consciously or unconsciously helps power to sustain itself. The ruling ideas which legitimize the dominance of one class over another get written into a literary work via the medium of the author. For a fitting example one may quote a passage from Plato’s *Ion* :

For the poet is a light and winged and holy thing and there is no invention in him until he has been inspired and is out of his senses, and the mind is no longer in him. When he has not attained to this state he is powerless and unable to utter his oracles.

A close look at the passage shows that Plato relies on the common linguistic stock used to describe poets and poetry. Hailing the poet as ‘a holy thing’ would sanction her/him a vantage point above the level of those who would consume literature (in this case, poetry), thereby disseminating bits of cultural codes, formulate linguistic paradigms and the like through it. That is why literature has always been presented as containing grave moral truths about human civilization

and human nature. Theodor Adorno, one of the German Marxists of the Frankfurt School aptly comments on this aspect of literature :

Committed works of art all too readily credit themselves with every noble value, and then manipulate them at their ease. Under fascism too, no atrocity was perpetrated without a moral veneer... The notion of a 'message' in art, even when politically radical, already contains an accommodation to the world : the stance of the lecturer conceals a clandestine entente with the listeners who could only be rescued from deception by refusing it. ('Commitment', Marxist Literary Theory p. 201)

The eighteenth century belief in the notion of the *Great Chain of Being* which sought to explain away poverty, misery and exploitation in terms of a divinely sanctioned hierarchy of status found its way in the literature of that age. 'The Essay on Man' (1732-34) by Alexander Pope is a glaring example. All this proves Adorno's contention that literature really "contains an accommodation to the world."

It would be, however, entirely fallacious to treat greatworks of literature as mere reflexes or symptoms of a certain ideology or consider authors and poets as fawningly flattering to a bourgeois elite. The modernist writers like James Joyce, Marcel Proust, Dorothy Richardson and so on, for example, provide in their novels a critique of the dehumanizing institutions and processes of society under capitalism by effecting a studied detachment in their central characters.

There is of course no denying that ideology takes recourse to literature to interpellate the users of language. But at the same time the question of resistance which Althusser somewhat minimizes cannot practically be ruled out. The literati can penetrate beyond the exterior facade of a literary work only if they opt for what the materialist philosopher Michel Pecheux has called 'dis-identification.' Disidentification means a conscious transformation or displacement in the way an individual is interpolated by an ideology. Such a transformation is really possible because no ideological discourse can monolithically interpellate a subject/individual.

The notion of disidentification can be likened to Brecht's idea of *alienation or estrangement effect*. While reading a text the reader should always remain alert to ideological forces which are at work in it, and endeavour to treat it only as a work of art and nothing else. One should always make sure one is not sinking into the world of the work, suspending one's cognitive capabilities. Whatever generally looks like an aphoristic and axiomatic and aesthetic universal must be placed under the magnifying glass of the history of capitalist exploitation as such.

References :

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