

BREAKFAST BY JOHN STEINBECK: A SITE FOR IDEOLOGICAL INTERPELLATIONS

Muhammad Saleem, PhD Candidate

Department of English, International Islamic University, Islamabad, Pakistan

Abstract

This study investigates *Breakfast*, a short fiction by John Steinbeck, in the light of Louis Althusser's theory of ideology expounded in his essay Ideological State Apparatuses (ISAs). According to this post-Marxist philosopher, social institutions like church, family, education, and morality paradigm are political agencies that work to inculcate the spirit of allegiance to the existing ideologies among the individuals of a given social formation. Interpellation is an essentially significant mode that is consistently employed to bend the living individuals as 'subjects' to the dominant institutional ideologies. The interpellated subjects, the subjected souls, are addressed in such a way that they continue to believe themselves as contented, autonomous and independent entities. But there are some occasions when the readers encounter the irregularities and fault-lines in the ideologically woven smooth literary text. This dialogic aspect of the text is central to its political character.

This study would use the popped up chunks of the given discourse to analyse how the ideological processes keep the addressed characters in a state of complacency. It is hoped that this paper would enable the readers to confront the strategic workings of the ideological hailings; they are also expected to spot the contradictions in the politically maneuvered text. These infrequent but subtle hints serve as a type of protest, resistance and critical deixis to the aestheticised ideological hegemonies.

Keywords: Althusser, ideology, breakfast, John Steinbeck

Introduction

Louis Althusser (1918-1990) is a respectable name in the post-Marxist traditions. He reworked Karl Marx by challenging the Russian version of Marxism and adjusting it to the context of new scholarship in the second half of the 20th century. While discussing Althusser's contributions as a post-Marxist philosopher, the intellectuals are reminded of his marked concept of ideology. He postulates that ideology is not something abstract or

illusory in character as the earlier Marx believed. Ideology is material in nature, concept, practice and behaviour; it is the name of the reproduction of relations of production and the structures of power relations (Althusser, 1971, pp. 145-153). He elaborated his new concept of ideology in his critical and thought stirring essay Ideological State Apparatuses (ISAs).

Society, in Althusserian terms, is controlled by two apparatuses: Repressive State Apparatuses (RSAs) and Ideological State Apparatuses (ISAs). RSAs work in militarily perspectives to repress the violators of the ruling ideology. Their manifestations are seen in police, courts, jails and other law enforcing agencies. On the other hand, ISAs work through the practices and behaviours of the social institutions like media, religion, politics, education, and morality. All these institutions are exclusively devised to pass on the tenets and parameters of the ideologies in rule to all the individuals of the historicized version of society. These hierarchical structures of ideological society address the humans with different names (Althusser, 1971, pp. 140-143). The social beings feel recognized and honoured. This processes of hailing commonly termed as interpellation is a political act in its form, content and attitude. It is that syllabus which coaches and trains the concrete humans in accordance with the requirements of the current ideological hegemonies. The real people are turned into the slave of a system but they do not realize this bitter fact at the critical level. Rather, the successfully hailed souls feel exalted, distinguished and contented. They are accommodated by the political interpellation in such a way that they feel themselves as lucky figures to be a subject of a social formation.

It is the temperament of a triumphant ideology to produce a sense among individuals that everything is ok with them. Reality is this that the exiting ideology is not so good for them. It is serving the vested interests of some powerful and unjust hegemonic group. But the thoroughly addressed subjects usually fail to recognize this fact. Art has been usually used to serve such type of ideologies. Althusser's theory of ideology is a tool in the hands of the readers and researchers to comprehend the operations, practices and functions of the ruling ideology. It also tells us that sometimes the presence of challenging ideology is observed in a piece of art. Resultantly, a conflict appears among the various perspectives and the reader is involved as a sensible and impartial critic to identify the healthy filter in the artistic creation and to distinguish it from other ones. In this way art assumes the character of a site where various ideologies are in interactive mode with each other to instigate the critical perceptions of the readers.

There are so many books and dissertations composed on the political works of John Steinbeck. Cynthia Bulkhead's book *Student Companion to John Steinbeck* (2002) is an important criticism nearly on all the important works by Steinbeck. The book is divided into chapters and each chapter

discusses a work by the author in a comprehensive fashion. Harold Bloom edited a book entitled *John Steinbeck* (2008) which consists of various critical commentaries by different scholars, on the author under analysis, from different angles. Richard D. Marshall's doctoral dissertation *The Grapes of Wrath: John Steinbeck's Cognitive Landscapes as Commentary on 1930s Industrialization* (2009) deals with American life in the period of Great Depression of the previous century from a cognitive point of view. There some critics who have made their critical efforts on *The Long Valley* by Steinbeck but no one applied Althusser's essay Ideological State Apparatuses to it. The present study is an analysis from a new angle on *Breakfast*, a story from this book.

Data Analysis

Catherine Belsey believes that ideology is engraved in each and every utterance and use of language but there are some other signifying systems of the social formation also where its presence can be traced easily: common sense, everyday behaviours, mores and folkways, myths, social gestures and routinised truisms are relevant signs in this regard (1980, pp 56-85). When, in *Breakfast* by Steinbeck, the young man and his old father come close to the stove, the pleasant smell of the bread surrounds them and they indulge in deep inhaling. The young man at once produces a linguistic response 'Keerist!' that is a local linguistic version of Christ. The utterance of the word Christ and the use of the sign of exclamation is all ideological construct. Ideology is a syllabus that is rigorously pursued by all the institutions of the social formation. In the real sense, it is the hard work of the old fellow and the young man in the fields of cotton, the constant labour of the young woman in the cold morning and the cooperation of the suckling baby that contribute to the realisation of the breakfast and its pleasant smell. But no mention is made in this regard rather; all this is ascribed to the kindness and will of Jesus. This uncritical attitude of the young man has been shaped by his repeated subjection to the religious institution. In fact, the entire family has been successfully interpellated by the church ideology. The striking thing to be noticed is the illiterate self of the young man that is unable even to pronounce the name of the prophet of Christianity correctly. But as far as his acquired learning is concerned, he is well educated to qualify as a trained subject in the ideological institution of the religion.

Religion as an ideological state apparatus plays its significant role to recruit the subjects in a specific realm and at the same time it strengthens the other ruling ideologies for the maintenance of the specific social formation. Morality of the family is also bracketed with the processes of ideological hailing. Two men come out of the tent and say 'morning' to the narrator. They are not surprised or angered to see a stranger there who entered their

residence area without any permission and now was warming his hands at the stove around which the young woman was busy in the preparation of breakfast. They are so happy to see a stranger there that their intimate and cordial self is turned on at once. The old man asks ‘Had you breakfast?’ and the narrator says ‘No’. ‘Well, sit down with us, then’ are the words that the narrator listens (1999, pp. 59-64). Sincerity and simplicity behind the invitation forces the narrator to move to the packing case to squat there to have the breakfast along with the ideologically hailed family. What is interesting to observe is this that the itinerant poor family, without a home of its own, lives in a mobile tent; it has not any bright prospects of permanent and honorable employment, and it is with extremely low standards of living. In spite of all these cruel, hard and materialistically real facts of social life, the family is practically generous enough to cordially invite a comparatively rich person for sharing breakfast. This ideologically woven morality keeps the people in the tight grip of contentment; the parameters of their morality train these social figures to remain thankful to God in every type of circumstances; they have been interpellated ideologically not to make complains about their problems. Rather, they consider it a remarkable feature of their character to absorb worries and bear troubles of life with a smiling face.

Althusser holds that it is not essential that only base is to control the superstructure. What normally happens is this that there is interplay between the two. Often the institutions of the superstructure remain in a constant process of action and reaction that culminates in change on both sides (Hawkes, 1996, pp.117-130). An uncritical attitude of the members of the family which is informed by the ideologies of church and that of morality also influences their sense of entertainment, pleasure and joy. The members of the family maintain a sense of coordination at every level. They, along with the narrator, squat to have a breakfast that consists of many articles of ordinary nature. The group frantically enjoys the food for a long time. They quickly refill their plates and coffee cups. ‘The older man filled his mouth full and he chewed and chewed and swallowed. Then he said, ‘God Almighty, it is good’, and he filled his mouth again’. This chunk is significant politically, ideologically and symbolically. Every dominant ideology is pleased when its subjects pursue their ideological operations at a stretch, in a robot like fashion and without any interruption in the action. The linguistic chunk ‘chewed and chewed and swallowed’ metaphorises the age long practices of a generation to repeat the ideological patterns of their life uncritically and to be proud of it. It is ironical to state that they earn bread with their own hands amidst a lot of difficulties but they do not take its credit rather, they assign it to God. Religion, morality and traditions have successfully alienated them of their work, true self and actual sense of actual

life. In Althusserian terms it would be wrong to say that ideology has victimized and befooled them. Fact is this that these people being material beings are materially behaving subjects; the ideologies are influencing them materially and they respect and act upon them materially. What is important they do not diagnostically see through the ideological framework in which fixed they are.

A social formation is in fact a manmade entity but the ideologies that govern it sanctify the given practices and social structures to such an extent that the ideologically hailed subjects just worship it. The vision of the members of the family of seasonal workers is single-dimensional. Their imagination is limited to the immediate environment of the present. The young man, while sitting for the breakfast, says, 'We had twelve days work so far'. For this chap these twelve days period is the only thing on his memory; he is unable to compare and contrast these few lucky days with a big stretch of past and future times without any employment. The prevailing ideologies keep his gaze upon what is good at present. The unemployed period both in present and future is just overlooked. It is a feature of the dominant ideology to pronounce that everything is good and pleasant in the given social formation. To smooth over the contradictions found in the society, it tries to create series of pleasant looking images. For example, the lady sitting beside the stove adds to the illusory sweet atmosphere saying, 'They even got new dungarees'. At this, the two men 'looked at their new dungarees, and they both smiled a little'. To a simple minded reader, all this may appear an ideal thing to observe but to the creative reader it is all due to the functions and processes of ideological interpellations. The declaration of the young man during the breakfast, 'We been eating good for twelve days' provides a lot of irregularities and loopholes in the seemingly ideal ideologies. The deconstructive reading of this slogan of the young man tells a lot about the social hardships and miseries of poverty and unemployment that have been visitant upon them in abundance. The future prospects of the family are also not bright ones; right after few days, the family may be in the previous situation of insecurity. But at present, they are quite enthralled. In fact the individuals ideologically involved in a situation are usually stripped of clear vision. On the other hand, the perceptive reader who is away from the situation is equipped with clear vision to interpret the family under discussion.

The social formation against which the present story is composed is consisting of a network of ideologies. One of them is conceived through the typical role of a woman in the narrative. 'The girl kept to her work, her face averted and her eyes on what she was doing'. As an ideologically addressed subject, she has to perform different roles. She is the early riser in the family because she has to prepare the breakfast for all. She lights fire in the rusty

stove, bakes bacon in the boiling grease, takes plates, biscuits and gravy from the petty oven and sets the breakfast before the members of the group. She as a woman is a marginalized character who lives her life as a successfully interpellated subject. The observable thing is the consistency of her labour; she does not deviate from role as an oppressed lady; she even does not make complaint about it. Being a female character of the story *Breakfast*, she shares the fate of female folk that are spotted in the other stories of *The Long Valley*. She feels herself elevated in her role as an eastern woman for the male. But her role is typical and limited one. When the breakfast is finished, “her role in the story is done” (Bily, 2011, p 79). She is not to accompany the men folk when they leave the home in search of livelihood. She is the wife of the young man but she does not get any amorous look from him during the breakfast. The characters in *The Long Valley* are in general lonely souls but women are the specific case. But in spite of all these problems, the woman of the given story remains calm, composed and contented and it is all due to the miracles of the interpellation processes of the ruling ideologies of the society.

The story *Breakfast* can be called a site for the existence of dominant as well as the challenging ideologies. The narrator, most of the time, tries to present the discourse of the dominant ideologies; he also tries to present the narrative as a unified whole. For this purpose, he stresses the traditional simplicity and purity of life of the seasonal farm workers. To award innocence and naturalness to the current life of the family, the narrator describes their life conditions in the accompaniment and background of nature. Sometimes an impression is created that these family members are very happy family. And they themselves also work for this impression. But a little perceptive gaze penetrates the artificial impression and the bitter truth is revealed. The narrator infrequently but programmatically alerts the reader to notice the other side of the general perspective produced in the short fiction. While moving smoothly, the narration sometimes pricks the reader to come out of the trance and empathy with the family. These jerks are the signs and presences of the challenging ideologies. The reader, who has some knowledge of the workings and processes of the ideological ‘hailing’, can easily detect the alternative point inserted in the writing. Such type of text is called ‘interrogative’ discourse. The alienated and ignored aspects of life are presented in passing references usually. Keeping this dimension in mind Cynthia A. Bily says that all the stories, including *Breakfast*, in *The Long Valley* raise different types of questions for the reader (2011, p, 88). The narrator, while describing the interest and fondness of the young mother for the preparation of breakfast, emphasizes her gaze that remains fixed on work. Her absorbedness in work is paralleled by the long hair, tied with a string, which continues to sway on her back. The gracefulness of the lady is

stressed to prove that the lady is quite a unified whole. But the fault-lines in the discourse sometime rear their head to make the textual togetherness doubtful. The girl keeps her eye upon her work but sometimes her face is 'averted'; her gaze is also disturbed due the stinging of the hair that is why now it is tied with a string.

There are some significant occasions that alert the reader to identify the interrogative character of the text. The narrator and the other grown up members of the family take breakfast enthusiastically; they refill their cups and plates to devour the food hurriedly. Suddenly, the warm coffee 'scaled' their throats. This burning of the throat by hot coffee is a distancing device used by the narrator to shake the people to have a critical analysis of their uncritical activities. The narrator comes to the stove early in the cold morning. He romantically puts his hands upon the fire burning in the rusty stove. All of a sudden, the heat strikes him and he shivers across the body. The stove is full of fire upon which the breakfast of the family is prepared. The girl arranges pieces of wood carefully so that the air draft may help to develop the fire. Most of the fire remains within the stove with which the food is cooked but some of its flames come out through the cracks; these rebellious flames produce the dancing shadows upon the nearby tent. To the present researcher, this is a political material projected on the figurative level. The fire that has been used in the stove to prepare food stands for all the ideological state apparatuses that address the subjects to be interpellated successfully in a particular conceptual framework. This role of the fire is going on uninterrupted since long ago. The people in general seem to be contented with this role of the fire. That is why the ideologically hailed lady continues to surround the stove, the narrator feels warmed by the fire, the male figures of the family directly approach the fiery stove after the sunrise, and the baby helps out its mother to carry on her kitchen work revolving around the stove fire. All the characters of this family assemble together on the product of the stove. It is this fire that provides energy to the seasonal workers to go out for cotton picking in the fields. But there are occasions when the fire leaves its customary channel through the stove, produces cracks in it and comes out as a rebellious force. These are the signs of the alternative ideology though not foregrounded ones. The baby is also being trained ideologically in the story rather it is behaving like the other individuals. On the symbolic level, the baby's continuous adherence to the lady's breasts for milk is synonymous with the ideologically interpellated subjects' allegiance to the hegemonic ideologies; though sometimes the suckling sounds as the alternative choice are also heard.

An important thing about this story is this that its discourse is evolved socially not psychologically. The characters are the symbol of human consciousness that is determined by the social, cultural, religious and

political forces of the society. That is why the reader is trapped by the socially constructed text to produce his or her reaction against its ideological moves. The political writers always love to seek the help of the comic to further their ideological agenda. In fact the comic elements serve the aims and objectives of the political writers in the best possible way. Steinbeck, through his narrator, ridicules the dominant ideologies by targeting the contradictions found in the text under discussion. The lady is overjoyed on the new dungarees of the male members of the family. They, the old man and the young man, also express their pleasure by sending their gaze across their new uniform. But all this ideological stricken rapture is deflated when the reader juxtaposes this scene with the woman 'dressed in a faded cotton skirt and waist'. The seasonal workers who are in an occasional period of employment in the general atmosphere of severe poverty and unemployment are offering job of a cotton picker to the narrator. This is an ironical gesture that produces a lot of ridicule on the ideologically trained goofs. The narrator, through the art of characterization, shows the powerful impact of the exiting ideologies on the male members of the family. They are interpellated so successfully that they appear as the monotonous copy of each other. They come out the tent together, yawn together, look upon the eastern landscape together, welcome the narrator together, take breakfast together, stand up together and go out to the cotton field together. They are alienated of their true self in fact therefore their characters appear ridiculous.

Conclusion

The present research concludes that there are various Ideological State Apparatuses (ISAs) that work in the social formation that is depicted in the short fiction *Breakfast* by Steinbeck. Morality, religion, economy, hospitality and self-contentment are typical to be mentioned in this respect. All these ideologies have entered into a network to address each and every aspect of the members of the family ideologically. These ideologies, on purpose, interpellate the family to recruit them as subjects in accordance with the dictates and parameters of the social formation. In the words of Belsey, these hailed subjects continue to think that they are autonomous, sovereign and free in the choices of their life but the reality is this that they have been diplomatically subjected to the current ideological hegemonies of the social formation. These ideologically addressed subjects are just the subjects to the hierarchical rule. It is the magic and shrewdness of the relevant institutional ideologies that ideological subjects continue to exist in the complacent and contented atmosphere in spite of the fact that their happiness is hollow (Belsey, 1980, p 59-63). Normally, the bitter realities of life are kept hidden from their and eyes they remain in the grip of ideological happy version of life. But there are some occasions when the challenging ideology makes its

presence recognized. This interventionist aspect of the text changes it into a discourse that raises questions for the readers. These fault-lines expose the apparently smooth and unified texture of the life of the seasonal workers and that of the diction of the story under analysis. This research based upon the political reading of the short fiction is a new and useful interpretation for the readers and scholars on Steinbeck. Still there are many other areas that wait to be tapped; form and theme, reciprocity between the aspects of the superstructure, the mechanism of the unified and fragmented discourse are some of the examples. The present research may prove helpful in providing clues to the untapped areas for the future researchers.

References:

- Althusser, L. (1969). *For Marx*. Paris, France: The Penguin Press.
- Belsey, C. (1980). *Critical practice*. London, Great Britain: Routledge.
- Bily, A.C. (2011). Women, men and the environment in *The Long Valley*. In D. Noble (Ed.), *Critical insights*. (pp.75-93). California, USA: Salem Press.
- Hawkes, D. (1996). *Ideology*. London, Great Britain: Routledge.
- Steinbeck, J. (1999). Breakfast. In Dr N. R. Butt (Ed.), *A selection of short stories and one act plays*. Lahore, Pakistan: The Caravan Book House.