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Ideological Interpellation in Narayan's *The Gateman's Gift*

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Abstract:

R. K. Narayan's "The Gateman's Gift" exposes an ideological entrapment of a gatekeeper in the capitalist mode of production in which the means of production are under the bourgeoisie's possession. Ideology is a belief system that dictates an individual to run his life. Though an ideological hegemony always coerces individual in the society, it tends to influence them in many respects in the social structure. Apparently, it nurtures one to be the serviceman of other. In this backdrop, Govinda Singh after his twenty five years tenure at the business company consistently remains loyal to his sahib. Moreover, he retires with his continued loyalty to the officer, an embodiment of the colonial regime during the first half of the twentieth century. Govinda in his perennial journey in the capitalist world obligation to the ruler rehearses an ordinary subordinate personnel's intricacy in the capitalist-operated social structure under the false consciousness.

Keywords: ideology, false consciousness, interpellation, hegemony, coercion.

Rasipuram Krishnaswami Narayan's "The Gateman's Gift" exposes an inner working of ordinary subordinate's consciousness in the Marxist philosophical frame. Set in colonial India, Narayan's short story presents an ordinary watchman Govinda Singh in his total submission to officer, the colonial agent as the gateman's during the British Raj in India. Govinda retires because of his poor eyesight and hearing inability after his twenty –five years of service for the company. He, with his spouse lives a humble and bucolic life out of his twelve rupees pension. His wife also earns doing unskilled menial jobs of washing and sweeping in a couple of houses. This is the proof of their low class life which they are honestly running. He is happy with his retirement days. He spends time by making the clay toys and visiting the nearby stalls of his cousin. This exemplifies that he never complains about the social order in which he is in the low status. The bourgeoisie's ideological entrapment is strong that ordinary people like Govinda

seldom has the consciousness to undo the status quo in the society. Rather such people entertain the system and let it go as per ruler's design.

Habituated with visiting the old office for pension on the first day of every month, he takes the special gift with him for his sahib and hands it over to the Accountant. According to the accountant it is a highly commendable job. Inspired by these words, he sharpens his skill of making the toys. One day he makes a toy of his office where his boss is descending the stairs for his car and he is at the gate saluting him in khaki uniform. This special toy he gifts to his boss on his next pension day. After some days of this event, he receives a registered letter which he fears to open due to ill omen and his illiteracy. He has the fear that the letter contains his dismissal from the job. He is suggested to go to X-ray office when he asks his neighbor about the content of the letter. He visits there and the Gurkha watchman reminds him to come back after the recovery of his illness.

He starts desperately wandering in the middle of the road and acting like a growling lion in front of the school children. Like an insane man he smashes the street light and misguides the traffic which leads him to the police station. This is the second trial he has got. First one was in Mesopotamia where he was under half ration that had starved him during World War I. After reaching at home whatever toys that he has dexterously made, he smashes it.

Fortunately he meets with his office Accountant when he is acting like a tramp on the road. The Accountant helps him read the letter. When he knows that he has got one hundred rupees from his sahib appreciating his gift, he is relieved and he turns to be a sane but stops making the toy.

It is obvious that Narayan is a popular Indian English writer who deals with Indian local subject matter yet he has global readers. My concern in this article is to raise the following issue: Why does one always like to be in the same social position? What causes him to feel inferior to other? How is a person hegemonised? How long one remains in the web of ideology that makes him follow the existing social order? Definitely, the answer of these queries, are in Marxism that goes with ideology.

Using the ideological social structure of the time of British Raj in India Narayan writes story which has been widely read and interpreted in English literature. According to H. C. Trivedi and N. C. Soni :

The stories belong to the Indian soil and are redolent of its culture. In the main they depict South Indian life and clearly expressing Narayan's view of the world and those who live in it. Simple but fascinating plot, lively characterization, strict economy of narration and elegant simplicity of language are features of these short stories. (165-66)

They talk of the writing style and locale taste of R. K. Narayan's writing which is fascinating indeed. Similarly, "C. D. Narasimhaiah, who along with Iyengar, can be considered a pioneer in the field of Indian English criticism in India, also notes the Indianness of Narayan" (qtd. in Khair148). He reads Narayan's writing from the perspective of local colour. Likewise, William Walsh in *R. K. Narayan: A Critical Appreciation* states that "Narayan offers a lucid and an eloquent study of his novels. William Walsh, who makes generous and apt use of quotations from Narayan's work, traces Narayan's artistic development and brings into clear relief the qualities that characterize his fiction: gentle irony, humour, and a tolerance of human foibles" (qtd. in Sarkar 2). Here she talks of the literary devices by Narayan.

Further, P.S. Sundaram, a notable critic, in *R. K. Narayan: As a Novelist* provides a vivid analysis of all the novels of Narayan. In his view, "Narayan has achieved popularity without resorting to the themes like sex and violence or emphasis on pseudo-spirituality" (19). His statement is about the popularity of Narayan's writing though he does not talk of the voluptuous theme. Another notable critic, Harish Raizada in *R. K. Narayan: A Critical Study of his Works* attempts to study the characteristics of the author. He says, "The author minutely observes the dispassionate manner in which he judges the Indian life of his own times. He also highlights R. K. Narayan's artistic impersonality and serene abstraction from life." He further observes, "in Narayan's novels there is no didacticism, no philosophy and no propaganda" (14). Ideology and its Effect in "The Gateman's Gift"

According to *Collin's Cobuild English Language Dictionary*, "An ideology is a belief or a set of beliefs, on which people, people, parties, or countries base their actions" (718). It means belief is assimilated by an individual, a party and a country which guides them to do something. Similarly, Pramod K. Nayar defines ideology as "a system of beliefs, ideas, ideals, aspirations, values and anxieties that mask the true nature of social relation and power structures, and which determines our perception of the world" (81). To him ideology of an individual sets his sense of perception and sometimes it help mask the social relation.

Likewise Ian Buchanan's defines ideology as "a set of beliefs, convictions or ideas which both binds a particular group of people together and determines the actions they take. For this reason ideology is often used- particularly in media- as a pejorative, as if to say only a certain type of people have (indeed 'suffer from') ideology and it renders them incapable of thinking for themselves" (243). To him, it is an ideology that binds people for the action that take. Sometimes it stops to do something and impose actions upon other also.

From the same plain, Ann B. Dobie reads ideology as "a belief system produced, according to Marxists, by relation between the different classes in a society, classes that have come about because of the society's modes of production. An ideology can be positive, leading to a better world for the people, or it can be negative, serving the interests of repressive system" (92). Here Dobie's interest in defining ideology lies in the fact that different classes in the society have different ideology which can be good for one a group. In the meantime, it can be bad for another group. Primarily interest-led ideology of a group is quite fatal for another group who cannot assimilate it.

In this way ideology is a 'science of ideas' that is generated by the dominant group of people to ensure its safe position. If a person falls into the ideological abyss of the powerful class, he accepts it and there is his cultural conditioning. Then after he never dares to question, or protests this status quo environment which is known as false consciousness.

In the story, "The Gateman's Gift" the protagonist Govinda, the gatekeeper, works in a company without getting promotion for twenty five years and does not have any grievance because he is content with the running system. Or in another words, the capitalist cultural industry has so brainwashed him that he has no idea to go against the system that dictated him during his office tenure.

To keep people under the canopy of false consciousness according to Lois Althusser, the ruling class uses ideological state apparatus that entails family, school, church, university. Such institutions preach the creed of the ruling class which is always plausible whether or not it serves the greater community. The ruled class gives their consent to be under the influence of the ruling class. On the other hand if the general people dare to defy the vested interest of the rulers the latter uses the repressive state apparatus which is law police to coerce the dissenter. This conditioning process is interpellation which talks how an individual finds his subject position in the society.

This ideological assimilation sometimes is willful where people offer their consent and it is coercive where the nation/state applies force to impose ideas upon people or the ruled ones. Despite this, there are gaps in ideology while executing it into praxis which the surgeons of state ideology suture time and again and keep the state ideology intact.

In fact the essence of Marxism lies in the economics based classes. There are haves (rich) and have nots (proletariat) classes in the society which are generally known as superstructure and the base respectively. The superstructure in the modes of production entraps the base because the latter is incapable of agency fails to recognize its status and the paradigm set by the former and becomes alienated in the social structure. Metaphorically the working class people become the prey of the ideological web woven by the powerful class.

In “The Gatekeeper’s Gift” Narayan explicitly shows two classes as envisioned by Karl Marx. The gatekeeper, Singh, his wife, and the official staff of the company belong to ‘have nots’ group who work as per the work plan of the sahib, owner of the company who stands for haves group. This shows how the minority possesses the means of production and rules the working class people. In the edifice metaphor of Althusser, the sahib is the superstructure and Singh lies on the base. In the mode of production and reproduction the company owned by the sahib pays the workers though not decent and prepares them to be the tools for the company’s benefit so that the company exists there perennially without letting the workers know that they are brainshed. The omniscient narrator describes:

He was given a khaki uniform, a resplendent band across his shoulder and a short stick. He gripped the stick and sat down on a stool at the entrance to the office. And when his chief’s car pulled up at the gate he stood at attention and gave a military salute. The office consisted of a staff numbering over a hundred and as they trooped in and out every day he kept an eye on them. At the end of the day he waited the footsteps of the General Manager coming down the stairs and rose stiffly and stood at attention, ...and after he left hundreds of staffs poured out. The doors were shut; Singh carried his stool in, placed it under the staircase, and placed his stick across it. Then he came out and the main door was locked and sealed. In this way he had spent twenty-five years of service, and then he begged to be pensioned off. (39)

This extract shows the classes and how the gatekeeper has been doing his duty for twenty five years. His “khaki uniform with band” indicates his blue colour level in the office and his saluting to his sahib goes with his tuning with the official rule. He has never felt it as coercive or painful but rather he is quite happy. The plus point of the ruling ideology is that it succeeds in hegemonizing the ruled ones, who never get a chance to identify that they are being trapped in such an ideology. Singh is humble, punctual, and docile within the perimeter of capitalist modes of production. He says *salaam* to his senior and abides by the company's rule. As in the capitalist production model, the sahib owns the company, deploys the Singh-type of people who do not know how they have been attuned by the company's law. Instead of demanding increment in salary or promotion, Singh feels indebted to the company.

In this way, the sahib exercises both political power unquestionably. The working class people never doubt about the position of the rulers. Rather they succumb in front of this power structure. Indeed they are interpellated into subordinate class by means of ideological indoctrination which deemed to be preordained and natural for them. When Govinda gets the chance to meet his boss in person twice, he regards it as if he met with God and felt blessed. The omniscient narrator states:

And he spoke again only on this day. Though so little was said, Singh felt electrified on both occasion by the words of his master. In Singh's eyes the chief had acquired a sort of Godhood, and it would be quite adequate if a god spoke to one only once or twice in a life time. In moments of contemplation Singh's mind dwelt on the words of his master, and on his personality. (39).

It proves that when one is under the ideological hegemony or the influence of the power holders, one succumbs to the system. Like Govinda in the story, one remains loyal and gullible. As *Chaukidar*, Govinda is trapped by the false consciousness, he copes with the situation and never thinks of rebelling. Rather, after getting a chance to meet to the sahib who for him is equal to god and he feels 'electrified.' It means he is glad and in the situation of being blessed.

As the extract shows, capitalist ideology has so strongly set the discourses and social codes by means of ideological state apparatus and interpellates (doctrinal penetration into the mind of the gullible people) them by means of art, media and social discourses that people readily abide by it. The grip of false consciousness is so strong that Govinda-type of character becomes gullible and submits to the status quo. This consent leads to hegemony which as per

Nayar means, “Hegemony is the domination of one section of society by another, achieved through the use of the ideology so that the dominated classes/ section concede their ‘innate’ subordinated nature and accept their oppression as natural and preordained” (81).

Even after the retirement, Govinda continues to uphold his false consciousness. On his pension day, he feels he owes something to his boss and in gratitude he takes gift with him to the office to give to his boss. The narrator notifies it in the story, “Give this (clay toy) to the Sahib please!” (40). It indicates that he yields in front of the already set social structure. If he does not bring the gift to the sahib there could be deduction in his pension or ending. Keeping this fear in mind he gifts his master monthly. While doing so he feels satisfied. And by consent, he goes with the structure.

Not only this but also when he was in a subaltern post in the army he was under army commander abiding his command now under the social and official order. This pinpoints his docility or submissiveness throughout his career. Sudden, after his retirement, he realizes that he has the artistic skill of making the clay toy. He starts doing it and is loved by many people. This somehow indicates his consciousness to do an independent job as his hobby which is challenged on pension day of every month when he visits his office for twelve rupees. On this day he forgets his independent subjectivity and bears on the subjugate position awarded by the office decades ago. The narrator tells the readers: “This tenor of life was disturbed when he donned his old khaki suit, walked to his old office, and salaamed the Accountant at the counter and received his pension. Sometimes if it was closing he waited on the roadside for the general Manager to come down and saluted him, as he got into his car” (40). It refers the fact that what he was used to do in the past is used to doing in the present because of the ideological legacy fallen upon him. It sharply refers that on is made be in quo status without letting him be familiar with the reality. Once when an individual gets conditioned he remains in the same position forever in a capitalistic social structure. Govinda sets himself automatically in the conditioning machine of the office. While offering the gift, under the effect of false consciousness he feels sorry because his wonderful gift created the commotion among the office staff who came to see it disturbing the office hour. The narrator explains:

At last he made his masterpiece. A model of his office frontage with himself at his post, at the entrance, and the chief getting down; this composite model was so realistic that while he sat looking at it, he seemed to be carried back to his office

day. He passed it over the counter.... People cried and looked admiringly at Singh. A sudden fear seized Singh and he asked: 'The master won't be angry, I hope?' (41)

There is deeply rooted ideology in the mind of the gatekeeper which has been implanted by the master so that even while honouring the boss he is fear-stricken. Further, it explains the vicious circle of capitalist ideology or the modes of production from which Singh never succeeds to come out. Consequently after not getting promotion despite his twenty five years' service he never felt alienated. It evidences how ideology recruits and transforms him into a cog.

There is an ironic twist in the story shortly after the commodification of his handiwork. In reification, the commodity or the person is valued from the market point of view whereby the utility value counts much more than the real value of the object. When Singh receives a registered postal letter he goes mad. The letter contained one hundred Indian currency as a gift to the gatekeeper. Implicitly, it can be said that the artifact produced by the gatekeeper has been valued from market point of views and the prize has been given to him. In capitalist cultural industry the aura of the artifact is looked through market value. People do not go with the aesthetics of art.

The letter for a short time frees him from the dominance of bourgeoisie. He drives mad and runs here and there; "His madness had given him a sense of limitless freedom, strength and buoyancy" (44). His unruly running and smashing the prevailing street lamp and (mis)guiding the traffic are away from the social subjugation; "He felt a tremendous freedom of limbs, and didn't feel it possible to walk at an ordinary pace. He wanted to fly. He swung his arms up and down and ran on with a whoop" (43), yet it is a mirage because instantly he is under the control of repressive state apparatus when the police uses coercive force to regulate him.

With regards to the social constrain, the story entails; "A policeman put his hand on his shoulder.... The constable said: 'Come to the station'" (44). Now the issue goes with Althusserian interpellation whereby the gate keeper misrecognizes himself as a subject and thereby he forgets that he is what society has allowed him to be. Buchanan elaborates Althusser's concept; "They (people) are simultaneously the subjects of society because ideology recruits them and transform into the subjects (which means the product of society and the subjected to the society, meaning subordinate to society) by persuading them to occupy a subject position it has prepared for them" (251). His prime concern is to decry how society (that has already set

ideology) moulds an individual to find the suitable position in the society. Here in the story also the arrest of the gatekeeper is a process of moulding him as per the social design in the story. He is not the sovereign subject rather an ideologically subjugated subject so that he needs the canopy of his sahib that connotes the pension while receiving it, Govinda has to benefit and he does so himself as per the office code. It proves that false consciousness shapes people without letting them know that they are under the ideological design of the rulers.

Finally the smashing the toy by the gatekeeper signifies the fact that when a person is recruited in the social code, he gets transformed as per the design of the superstructure. He guesses that it is his creativity that is distancing him from his God-father, the sahib, which is in fact under the spell of false consciousness. He was hegemonized under commander's command during World War First now likes to be under the canopy of sahib. There's no freedom for the subaltern because he is in the capitalist's 'worlding' system the conditions the people who live a simple life and enjoy ruling system.

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