



SLUMDOG COMETH! A STUDY OF ALTHUSER'S THEORY OF IDEOLOGY AND INTERPELLATION

Dr Geetanjali Joshi Mishra

(Lecturer in English, Amity School of Languages, Amity University, Lucknow)



Article Info:

Article Received: 20/09/2014

Revised on: 25/09/2014

Accepted on: 29/09/2014

ABSTRACT

Althusser's theory of ISA (ideological state apparatus) and RSA (repressive state apparatus) are only too well known. They have been one among the many theories of realistic appraisals of the society and an extension of Althusser's study of Ideology. These theories must be touched upon briefly before we move to place the Hollywood blockbuster in their perspective. The present paper is a study of the Oscar winning movie 'Slumdog Millionaire' in the backdrop of Althusser's theory of Ideology and Interpellation

keywords: *Ideology, interpellation, identity*

Althusser's theory of ISA (ideological state apparatus) and RSA (repressive state apparatus) are only too well known. They have been one among the many theories of realistic appraisals of the society and an extension of Althusser's study of Ideology. These theories must be touched upon briefly before we move to place the Hollywood blockbuster in their perspective.

Ideology is a very specific term used in the post-Marxist theories, such as Christian ideology, democratic ideology, feminist ideology, Marxist ideology, etc. Luis Althusser (1977) shows that there are two major mechanisms of State organization for ensuring the people of the State. The first is the RSA, or Repressive State Apparatuses that can enforce the public behavior directly, like police, the criminal justice and prison system. The ISAs are some kind of institutions, which manufacture ideologies like schools, literary studies, religions, the family, legal systems, politics, arts, sports, etc help people to build up ideas and values, and to believe the State as such

is eternal. In discussing the concept of Ideology as material existence, Althusser takes the notion of 'subject' as his central term upon which everything depends. His arguments that there is no practice but 'by' and 'in an ideology and that there is no ideology except, by the subject and for the subject' have only been too famously stated.^[1] Of greater import than this is that the, subject in Althusser's theory is created by the ideological process that works on the individual.^[2] It is an entity that is formed through the working of ideology on the individual. The creation of the subject from the individual takes place through 'hailing' or 'interpellation'. To explain this Althusser referred to the police act of interpellating someone: 'Hey you!', and the

Subsequent turning backward of the guilty subject (person). Althusser thus pointed out the essential relationship between guilt and subjectivity.

It is this interpellation that takes place in 'Slumdog Millionaire' too. The argument here is that the movie is but an effort on the part of the ISA and

RSA to interpellate the slumdogs. It fixes the subject and forces the ideology on the acquiescing individuals willing to be identified in the category of the movies hero. The movie is but a step forward in deepening the abyss that ideology creates in the character and the identity of the slumdog. It brings into life an inexorable categorization of the marginalized 'other' by the colonizer; it interpellates all Indians, at least all poor Indians and slum-dwellers, as dogs of the slums. Should the argument go any further to include the appraisal of the title of the movie, the movie would be seen as interpellating all Indian millionaires as slumdogs and vice versa.

The movie focuses upon Jamal, the boy of the slums and traces his story to sudden stardom. The grown-up Jamal is found in a popular television quiz show and is about to win a million rupees on his next correct answer. Much to the annoyance of the rich quiz master who is antagonized by Jamal's impudent and mysterious knowledge, the 'chaiwala' (tea seller from the slums) rides his destiny and is watched by the whole nation. The ride to riches is not that smooth however, as Jamal has to respond to his identity. The quizmaster finds it apt to hand the enigmatically fortunate boy over to the local police station for an investigation of fraud and cheating. And much before the audience is told who Jamal is, the police constable has hurled a volley of invective at him. The boy is tortured, leashed, even given a dose of electric shock before he begins to be called a slumdog. The inspector who interrogates him categorises him first: "How could a slumdog answer the questions that intellectuals and 'quizvallahs' cannot?" In his effort to respond to the charge that a slumdog could not have answered the questions, Jamal takes us on a journey wherein not merely once but many a time had he been treated as a slumdog.

The story moves from the first question to the penultimate and with every question's answer comes out a being without any existence, a boy named Jamal who happened to be in the grip of the forces he could not respond to. Sitting in the police station, Jamal Mohammad takes us into his days in the slums. He takes us into the pool of human waste that he swam to get the autograph of a Bollywood superstar, how he lost his mother in the Bombay riots and saw another child of his own age dressed as a

demonic Hindu God, how he became homeless and later escaped the clutches of a gang of criminals to become a thief, how his brother became a criminal and his girlfriend a prostitute and, finally, how he became the 'chaiwala' with the opportunity to win a million rupees in the game show of the rich, elite, sophisticated India. Yet Jamal retains till the end the very identity and the guise that he was born in. In fact the only time the identity stands more confirmed and firmer than the beginning of the movie is the moment Jamal realizes that he has become a millionaire. Winning money bears no impact on the identity of Jamal Mohammad. It is the ideology that preys upon Jamal, the protagonist is its subject. The victimizer, the dominant force, is the middle and the rich class in India. But in no apparent way does it end there.

The movie is the final victimizer: it is the greatest ISA, a sort of ideological state apparatus, which convinces the audience of the squalor and the pathetic identity of the slums and, by extension, it mires and soils the identity of India to the west. This is what the fabric of our argument is, put in the perspective of Althusser's theory, the western point of view is interpellating the slumdog and extending the treatment to India; it finds itself present in India in the form of the rich quiz master and the policeman in the movie who only reinforce the identity of the slumdog in the minds of the audience and the west. While such interpellation is visibly present in the movie, the backdrop of the darkness against which the two boys escape from blinding, become thieves, the elder brother of the protagonist, Saleem, becomes a criminal and sleeps with the girlfriend of his own brother only adds to it. These are the vivid shades and strong examples of society's interpellation of the poor. A simple analysis of the movie may be that these characters are slumdogs and, therefore, they behave like this. Even the reverse might be true: because the characters act in the ways they do, they are 'slumdogs'. The movie has cleverly employed interpellation of the powerless by those in authority to shape the narrative up. The circumstances lead to the imaginary relationship of the characters to life, which further takes the form of an ideology within which the movie operates and discounts all other forms of life. It offers its

characters only one possible outcome: to be called slumdogs and finally act and behave like them.

The argument that the movie offers any succor to the slumdogs and their identity seems to be extremely fallacious. The slumdog does end up being a millionaire and gaining economic power but to what avail is it? His million bucks are a reward of destiny. The society and even his maker choose to call him not a millionaire but 'slumdog millionaire' and he has no option but to acknowledge that. The plot moves back and forth between the police station and the questions on the game show and further into the life of Jamal. The three things are interlinked. Jamal's life surrenders abjectly to the game show and the police station. It is a sort of misfit on the game show; it is only obvious that the game show host should laugh at and ridicule Jamal and go out of his way to get him tortured by the police. The power dynamics are palpably clear. The quiz master and the police mock Jamal in amusement and disbelief and generously confer the identity of a slumdog on him; the audience does much the same. They tacitly approve of the identity and stand amused at the whiz kid slumdog. It is as if the slumdog manages to entertain all and sundry, as long as they are away from the slumdog category, with his unbelievable, life-risking, self-mocking stunts.

'Slumdog Millionaire' appears in this perspective as a film that chooses to confer its singular title upon the protagonist only to strengthen world opinion about his identity. The world prefers to watch.

WORKS CITED

- [1] Ferretter, Luke. Louis Althusser. *Routledge*. Oxford. 2006. 84. Print
[2] *ibid*
-