

Art Against Ideology: An Althusserian Perspective

Javed Akhter¹ & Dr. Naseem Achakzai²

Litreature

Abstract

This ongoing research article traces the origin and development of Althusserian literary theory and its profound and far-reaching influences on certain theoretical currents of the whole world. Althusserianism is one of the schools of Marxism, which emerged in 1960s with the work of the most eminent French Marxist philosopher Louis Althusser [1918-1990] who revolutionised Marxism and Marxist literary theory. His theory gives the new and innovative perspective of analysing literary pieces of art. In Balochistan, Gul Khan Naseer, Abdurrahman Kurd, Nader Qambrani, Atta Shad and many other poets use their art to resist the dominant ideology of the ruling class. Althusserian theory helps us evaluate the relations between their art and ideology against they resist in their poetry. The present study focuses on the questions how the dominant ideology do insert its influences on the works of art and literature and how they do, in turn critically resist against it.

Keywords: Ideological State Apparatuses, Repressive State Apparatuses, Hegelian humanist Marxism, practice, anti-Humanism.

Introduction

Marxism took a new turn in the aftermath of May 1968, when the workers and students of France almost toppled General Charles de Gaulle's government. The strikers were outflanked as the French Communist Party [PCF] sided with General Charles de Gaulle. In this way, the PCF betrayed the working-class movement and did not lead it to revolution. Eventually, Althusser embarked on a new theoretical project, addressing the two main questions: how a social formation did achieve stability over time by reproducing its dominant relations of economic production and what

¹ PhD Scholar, Institute of Linguistics and Literature, University of Balochistan, Quetta.

² Institute of Linguistics and Literature, University of Balochistan, Quetta.

conditions did make social revolution possible? Propounding an anti-humanist and anti-Hegelian version of Marxism, Althusser highlighted its scientificity of Marxism and its instigation of how the various structures of social formation determined lived experience? His critique of Hegelian humanist Marxism continued to form Post-structuralist Marxism and his injection inspired the participants in the May 1968 students and working people uprising in France. He thus overhauled the classical Marxist base/superstructure theory of economic determination, by detailing how labour power was reproduced through prior forms of ideological subjection. For him, ideology works in conjunction with political and economic practice to constitute the social formation, a term designated to promote a more complex and radical analysis than the familiar term society, which often evokes either homogeneous mass or, alternatively, a loosely connected group of autonomous individuals and thus offer no challenge to the assumption of common sense.

For this reason, Althusser uses the term social formation for society, as constituting of three distinct but interrelated levels of practice such as the economic, political, and ideological ones. These Allthree levels are nterdepended with one another but each possesses relatively autonomous in relation to the others within concrete l socio-historical formations. Everything which takes place in every level from the literary production to social revolution, is determined in varying degrees by all other levels and this is a process of uneven and multiple determination and over-determination. Similarly, literary production is also a part of the economic level that is determined and over determined by the complex set of influences upon it of all other levels of social formation in which it produces. The decisive concept here is that of practice in which given raw material is transformed by given means of production into a determinate product. Althusser opines, “By practice in general I shall mean any process of transformation of determinate given new material into a determinate product, a transformation effected by a determinate human labour, using determinate means[of production]”[Althusser, L 1969: 166]. Each level of practice possesses its own specific effects. “Each mode of appropriation reality poses the problem of the mechanism of production of its specific effect, the knowledge effect for theoretical practice, the aesthetic effect for aesthetic practice, the ethical effect for ethical practice, etc.” [Althusser, L and Balibar, E 1975: 66].

Debate and Discussion

Althusser's research work captured the attention of the European intellectuals, being reputed the new interpretation of Marxism, shattering the pieties of Stalinist dogmatism and new Humanist Marxism influenced by Friedrich Hegel, Georg Lukács, Jean Paul Sartre, and Lucien Goldmann. These intellectuals opine Marxism as an effort to recover an alienated humanity. Elevating the individual as its centre of concern, humanism generally stresses human freedom of thought and action is limited by linguistic, psychological, or socio-economic systems. Althusser argues that such a view is informed by theories of transitive and expressive causality. Transitive causality posits an origin external to the effects it produces: striking a billiard ball with a cue, for instance, causes the ball to move and hit other balls. Likewise, expressive causality presumes a totality to which one essential part organises the rest.

For Althusser, "ideology interpellates individuals as subjects" [Althusser, L 1971: 175], which possesses its own means of production, relations of production and material products, having relative autonomy. It has a material force that wields a power in relations to other levels of social practice. In this manner, Althusser seeks to establish distinctions among science, literature, and ideology. Each of these levels works on and transforms a given raw material into a determinate product characterised by a determinate effect, the knowledge effect, aesthetic effect, and ideological effect. Althusser regards them as unchanging and eternal forms of cognition. Science, literary text, and ideological forms are materially conditioned products as well as the mere manifestation of invariant structures. Therefore, ideology is the very material of daily life and an Ideological State Apparatus like family, school, church, media, or art that is as crucial as a Repressive State Apparatus such as police, army, judiciary, or administration in maintaining the status quo. In Althusserian style of demarcation, it is necessary to make distinction between pop-culture or bourgeois-inspired transgression and truly subversive act of ideological, political, and even cultural transgression. Althusser defines ideology as "the imaginary relations of individuals to their real conditions of existence" [Althusser, L 1971:162].

Moreover, Althusser opines, "Ideology is a matter of the lived relation between men and their world. In ideology, men do indeed express not the relation between them and their conditions of existence, but the way they live

the relation between them and their conditions of existence: this presupposes both a real relation and an 'imaginary' 'lived' relation. ... In ideology, the real relation is inevitably invested in the imaginary relation that expresses a will. [conservative, conformist, reformist or revolutionary] a hope or nostalgia, rather than describing a reality" [Althusser, L1969:223-224].

Therefore, this thought enables Althusser to be interested in modernist abstract expressionist paintings, "the most austere experiments in French New Wave Cinema," [Montag, W 2003: 21], and the formal disruption of Minimalist Theatre, is not the subjective refusal of elitist formalism or objective reality of which these art forms are blamed by several Marxist critics. Althusser's critical onslaught on the foundations of bourgeois humanist ideology shows the way for new theoretical discourse. With the Copernican Revolution in astronomy and physics associated with the scientific theories of Galileo and Copernicus, transcendent teleology and ontology had been discredited. It is proved that the matter moves perpetually without origin or end but according to imputable laws. The Roman Catholic Church Authority, of course, did not accept these new scientific theories of the Renaissance period. That is why, the fate of Galileo [Althusser's appreciation for Brecht's play "The Life of Galileo" is not without reason] shows what the scientists can expect. Decentering the author from the centre of the process of literary production, Althusser reveals the historical facts about the various relations the author also has possessed with the literary texts, which bears his/her name. The divergent process in which they insert even as they dream, they are producing and the divergent raw materials they work on and transform in fabricating a literary work. Rejecting the romantic or idealist notion of the author as originator or creator of the text, Althusser opines, "the historically specific ways in which individuals are recruited or interpellated as authors by different ideological and repressive apparatuses" [Montag, W 2003: 135].

Althusser proposes his theory of art against ideology, revealing the relations between the both in "Letter on Art" in which his theory of aesthetics is clearly expressed, which offers conflation of theoretical specification and aesthetic preference. His aim is a real knowledge of art that is a rigorous reflection on the basic concepts of Marxism. Art is categorical distinct from science, having a differential relation to knowledge that makes us see the glimpse of the reality by virtue of internal distance, it establishes within ideology. Althusser's aim is a real knowledge of art and his main theme is no other

way, a rigorous one on the basic concepts of Marxism. However, Althusser “does not rank art among the ideologies” [Althusser, L 1971:222] but for him “real art is a practice which, using instruments of production of its own, works on and transforms the raw material provided by ideology to produce not the knowledge effect of science but the aesthetic effect of making visible by establishing a distance from it, the reality of the existing ideology” [Althusser, L 1971:222], transforming it so that we might see its operations at work. In Althusser’s opinion, “...art does not deal with a reality peculiar to itself” [Althusser, L 1971:223].

However, the object on which it works and which it transforms is “the spontaneous ‘lived experience’ of ideology in its peculiar relationship to the real” [Althusser, L 1971:223]. The same object is also of science by which Althusser means the Marxist science of ideology. Now the question arises, what is the difference between science and art? Althusser answers, “The real difference between art and science lies in the specific form in which they give us the same object in quite different ways: art in the form of ‘seeing,’ ‘perceiving’ or ‘feeling,’ science in the form of knowledge [in the strict sense, by concepts]” [Althusser, L 1971:223]. Althusser does not distinguish between an ideology and its lived material practices but for him ideology necessarily takes the form of lived experience, and does not exist except as such, “When we speak of ideology we should know that ideology slides into all human activity, that it is identical with the lived experience of human existence itself: that is why the form in which we are made to see ideology in great novels has its content, the lived experience of individuals” [Althusser, L 1971:223].

In short, art has a relation to ideology and a differential relation to knowledge. Althusser describes how art figures the lived experience of social formation. He suggests this internal distance comes from the novelist’s art or from the way in which art as such detaches itself from ideology, but what the novel represents ultimately is the spontaneous lived experience of ideology in its relation with the real. What the novel represents is structuring logic of ideology experienced not as a spontaneous lived experience but an elaborated system of representations of a specific structure in dominance. Furthermore, Althusser opines, “The works of an average or mediocre level” [Althusser, L 1971: 222] depends upon the bourgeois liberal humanistic ideology with which Marxist science breaks.

Althusser further writes, "Balzac, despite his personal political options, makes us see' the 'lived experience' of capitalist society in a critical form" [Althusser, L 1971:224]. He notes, "the fact that the content of the work of Balzac and Tolstoy is 'detached' from their political ideology and in some way makes us 'see' it from the outside} makes us 'perceive' it by a distantiating inside that ideology, presupposes that ideology itself" [Althusser, L 1971:225]. Defining the literary effect aesthetically, Althusser writes, "As you can see, in order to answer most of the questions posed for us by the existence and specific nature of art, we are forced to produce an adequate [scientific] knowledge of the processes which produce the scientific effect of the work of art" [Althusser, L 1971:225]. However, Althusser gives the specificity of art but he never distinguishes among literature, painting, and theatre as distinct art forms. He alludes to homologous mechanism of over-distantiation in each case, rendering ideology the object of art in general. According to him the specificity of art places art in essentially mid-way, between science and ideology. Science forms knowledge in the strict sense, but authentic art occupies a specific relationship to science in which it enables us to see, [which is not the form of knowing], is the ideology.

For Althusser, however, the specificity and peculiarity of art seems to have less to do with the formal properties of art marks on the viewer, reader, or critic than the ideological effect, Althusser calls a perception of ideology. Art provides us with a critique of the dominant ideology, which perpetuates the exploitative social relations. The critics need to develop a scientific discourse on aesthetics with "rigorous reflection on the basic concepts of Marxism"[Althusser, L 1971:207]. He adds "If we must turn ... to the 'basic principles of Marxism' in order to be able to [think] correctly, in concepts which are not the ideological concepts of aesthetic spontaneity, but scientific concepts adequate to their objects, and thus necessarily new concepts, it is not in order to pass art silently by or to sacrifice it to science: it is quite simply in order to know it, and to give it its due" [Althusser, L 1971::208].

Althusser's epistemology, regarding art, literature, and theatre [non-scientific] critique of the ideological formation, some of theory's privileges as a merely refuge from, or counter-weight to the tyranny of an otherwise all-pervasive ideology. Similarly, in his essay "Lucio Fanti, Lucio Fanti: the USSR as Phantom," Althusser discusses interior distances produced by art and literature in reflecting on Fanti's paintings derived from official Soviet

photographs. He notes, “Fanti’s recasting of Soviet images, and more particularly with their critique of official Soviet discourse. Lucio Fanti’s *Poetry Readers in the Snow* [1975] is a fantastic projection in oil paint, created in France with no knowledge of Moscow Conceptualism—a coincidence indeed, yet a satire, informed by Althusser, on the loss of the Soviet project, based on the artist’s contemporary perceptions and past memories of the USSR” [Althusser, L cited in Wilson, S, 2010: 97–122]. “In 1969, Robert Morris walked, mirror in hands, through a snowy landscape in America to make *Mirror*, a 16 mm black and white film. Fanti’s paintings make the impact on the minds of people what Althusser calls a miniscule interior distance” [Wilson, S 2010: 118] from the dominant Soviet ideology.

More interestingly, Althusser’s keen interest in modern paintings is reflected in one of his most important essays, “Cremonini, Painter of the Abstract.” Therefore, Althusser writes about Cremonini’s paintings, without naming them or citing their theoretical critical comments that depart from a realist theoretical perspective, “It is impossible to paint living conditions, to paint social relations, to paint the relations of production or the forms of the class-struggle in a given social society. But it is possible, through their objects, to ‘paint’ visible connections that depict, by their disposition, the determinate absence which governs them. The structure which controls the concrete existence of men, i.e. which informs the lived ideology of the relations between men and objects and objects and men, this structure, as a structure, can never be depicted by its presence, in person, positively, in relief, but only by traces and effects, negatively, by indices of absence” [Althusser, L 1971: 236-237].

It is precisely the subversion of the bourgeois humanist ideology, which fascinates Althusser and draws his attention towards the impressionist paintings of Cremonini. In his art, he says, “there are no objects, places, moments, or even people” [Althusser, L 1971: 230]. The decentring and dislocating impact of the lines interrupt the processes of ideological recognition in the mirrors while the juxtaposition of lines and circles produces a structure similar to that of Bertolazzi’s play “*El Nost Milan*” [“*Our Milan*”] and Brecht’s plays that does not achieve its critical effects by means of dissociation between the play and audience. The dissociation disrupts the spectators’ identification with the characters in the play in terms akin to alienation effect. Althusser puts, “It is not a question of place of some small

elements in the play of the actors, but a question of a displacement that effects the whole of the theatre's conditions"[Althusser, L1995b: 550, cited in Montag, W 2003: 142]. This structure is only recognisable from the exterior position of the spectator and only then as an absence, a faux outside produced by the over-distantiation effect of painting. However, art makes the spectator see, perceive, and feel a structure which is never visible as a structure, only discernible through its effects.

Althusser's essay "Bertolazzi and Brecht" may be better understood as a horizon of the theatre, as an ideal goal never fully realised in which he expresses his impressions of the play, "I wonder whether this asymmetrical decentred structure should not be regarded as essential to any theatrical effect of materialist character" [Althusser, L1969: 143]. It is the realisation that ideology is a main cause of literary production. Althusser writes, "Bertolazzi's explicit intentions are unimportant: what counts, beyond the words, the characters and action of the play, is internal relation of the basic elements of its structure I would go further. It does not matter whether Bertolazzi consciously wished for this structure, or unconsciously produced it: it constitutes the essence of his work" [Althusser, L 1969: 141]. Althusser examines the critical relationship of Brechtian dramaturgy to "the spontaneous ideology in which men live" [Althusser, L 1969: 144]. In short, Althusser's textual analysis of the plays of Brecht and Bertolazzi does not offer a theory of art and drama but it shows that he singles out for analysis of art and theatre that he considers as exceptional. Their exceptional is determined by their decentring effects and subversion of bourgeois humanist ideology. It distinguishes them from mediocre as well as great classical art and literature that have been dependent in the last analysis on this ideology that asserts itself in the form of a hero intact on a canvas.

Most startling and most interesting, is a theorisation of the complicity which inescapably relates the audience to the theatre. "Althusser notes, "The self-realisation presupposes as its principle an essential identity [which makes the processes of psychological identification themselves possible, in so far as they are psychological]: the identity uniting the spectators and actors assembled in the same place of the same evening. Yes, we are first united by an institution-the performance, but more deeply, by the same myths, the same themes, that govern us without our consent, by the same spontaneously lived ideology. Yes, even if it is the ideology of the poor par excellence, as in El

Nost Milan, we still eat of the same bread, we have the same rages, the same rebellions, the same madness [at least in memory where stalks this ever-imminent possibility], if not the same prostration before a time unmoved by any History” [Althusser,L 1969: 150]. This tension produces a Brechtian "alienation- effect," an estranging distance between the spectator and the play, or between the spectator and the "spectatorial consciousness" [since "the play itself is the spectator's consciousness"], which operates as the vehicle of ideological recognition under the sign of aesthetic "identification." This distance is produced now "within the play itself ... at once criticising the illusions of consciousness and unravelling its real contradictions” [Althusser,L 1969:147]. Althusser calls "the structure of the dialectic in the wings,” that unlike Brecht's plays, is "the basis for a true critique of the illusions of consciousness” [Althusser,L 1969:142].

The notion of absence was yet foreign in the debate of Post-structuralism in 1960s to formulate the Althusserian canon. For Althusser absence is a presence of a lack that loses its ontological position. As he opines, “the invisible of visible field is not generally anything whatsoever outside and foreign to the visible defined by the field” [Althusser, L 1975: 26].

Art gives us ideology in a way that is different from the knowledge of its objective class function as proposed by Marxism. It enables us, in a vocabulary of seeing, perceiving, or feeling ideology. It achieves its aesthetic effect by virtue of its ability to decentre the concept of the Absolute Subject which constitutes the focal point of identification within any ideology. In so doing, it disrupts the imaginary forms through which individuals’ relationship to the conditions of their social existence is represented to them. Althusser mentions "the great plays of Brecht,” the most striking of them are “The Life of Galileo”[1938–1943] and “Mother Courage and Her Children”[1939–1941]. The latter play is important as a decentred totality that is of the itinerant trading-woman who follows the armies of the Thirty Years War.

Consequently, “The Life of Galileo” may be understood in a similar light because these illusions are also legion in it, where Brecht challenges the conventional image of Galileo as the inventor and the discoverer of the telescope. As it is unjust to “Mother Courage” to minimise unduly the gap that separates the present from the state of society embodied in the play, so it would be underquote to see in Galileo but a veiled representation of the

situation of the scientist in the twentieth-century. Galileo is clearly shown to be in a unique historical situation, in which his scientific discoveries are but one manifestation of a new spirit of freedom, a new impulse towards emancipation from the bonds of the medieval order.

The dissociated and decentred structure of the plays makes the extraordinary importance of heroes impossible. The decentred structure of Bertolazzi's and Brecht's plays mark the strongest impressions on the readers, audience or spectators, turns Althusser to a reflection on Brechtian account of the 'alienation-effect. He comments, "Brecht refuses to make it that centre of the world it would like it to be. That is why in these plays the centre is always to one side, if I may put it that way, and in so far as we are considering a demystification of consciousness of self, the centre is always deferred, always in the beyond, in a movement of going beyond illusion towards the real" [Althusser, L 1969:145]. Althusser's essay "On Brecht and Marx" supports this reading because it is a continuation and further advancement of his study of materialist theatre, Althusser commences in Bertolazzi and Brecht. It suggests indeed the endless character of the task of breaking the ideological mirror which Althusser employs to *Piccolo Teatro: Bertolazzi and Brecht* in which he places a stress on the displacement of the symmetrical spectacular structure that owes to the Italian conjecture of the essay, the sonorous name "Spostamento" must necessarily begin by confirmation [the recognition and the acceptance] of the classical theatre.

In these essays, Althusser seems to identify this distantiation as the characteristic "aesthetic-effect. Althusser allows art itself a special value and he recognises that art and literature are embedded in ISAs such as museums, art galleries, publishing houses, media, recording companies, and TV Channels, Hollywood, and Bollywood studios. The function of these institutions or ISAs is to show up the ideas and values of ruling class through imaginary representations. The major contribution of Althusser's theory of art to the development of Marxist literary hermeneutics is that it enables us to think the literary text as a practice of transformation, as working upon and transforming of other forms of representation which give us rise to distinctive effect whose social impact can be subjected to a political calculation.

In Balochistan, many Brahui and Balochi poets may be studied from Althusserian Perspective, whose poetry stands against the dominant ruling ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses. For example, Gul Khan Naseer

critically resists against the ruling ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses in his Balochi poems: My Motherland, I am Rebel, The Night of Prison. Atta Shad does so in his Balochi poem: The Lord of Graveyard. Similarly, Abdurrehman Kurd challenges the dominant ideology of the ruling classes and Ideological State Apparatuses in his Brahui poems: Homeland, Seven Martyrs, Bahawal, the Warrior, Meer Lawang Khan, Meer Sher Mohammad Marri, The Worker, Meer Abdul Aziz Kurd, Agha Sultan Abraham Khan, Lala Ghulam Mohammad Shahwani and Mulla Mazar Bangulzai. Nader Qambrani also resists against the ruling ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses in his Brahui poems: In Memory of Lala Ghulam Jan Shahwani, Go Forward, Motherland, Comrades, Naseer Khan Noori, Constitution, Beautiful Earth and East.

Conclusion

The principal themes of the science of the text produced by Althusser gave the pivot to first wave of Althusserian-inspired Anglophone Marxist literary hermeneutics. Eagleton, Bennett, Catherine Belsey, Jameson, Sprinker, and many others also did so to harmonise Marxism with Post-structuralism after coming under the influence of Althusser. They possess much in common with Althusser. They enjoyed enormous success, fame, enthusiastic and wide followings in their countries as well as in the world. They came under the influence of the debates of relative autonomy of aesthetics within Marxism, generated by Althusser in 1960s and 1970s. Althusser's theory of art and ideology has also been foundational for analysing the works of art and literature as well as the flaws of the ruling ideology. Althusserian theory of art may be applied to the poets of Balochistan cited above in detail because their poetry stands against the dominant ideology of the ruling classes.

References

- Althusser, L. [1969]. *For Marx*. Trans. Ben Brewster. London: Allen Lane.
- Althusser, L. [1971]. *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*. Trans. Ben Brewster. London:
- Althusser, L. [1975]. *Reading Capital*. Trans. Ben Brewster. London: New Left Books.
- Montag, W. [2003]. *Louis Althusser*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Wilson, S. [2010]. "Althusser, Fanti: The USSR as Phantom." In: *The Visual World of French Theory: Figurations*. New Haven: Yale University Press.