

## IDEOLOGY AS THE REIGNING FORCE IN TRAGEDIES AND RIOTS

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### **Abstract:**

*This article discusses the latent power of the ruling ideology that not only administers our day to day activities but also serves as a potent force that guides the actions and thoughts of its subjects in tragedies and riots. The article deviates from a strict Marxist understanding of ideology and highlights how it interpellates individuals and how in turn, the created subjects make the ideology function. The article also seeks to describe the ways in which power is exerted in culture and society through various examples. It throws light on how petty yet potent cultural and social means like education, television, internet, etc., are used by people in power to fan out a particular ideology. In short, the purpose of this article is to understand the working of dominant ideology in a better way.*

**Keywords:** *Power, Dominant ideology, Subjects, Binaries, State-Apparatuses.*

“The Germans were already in our town, the Fascists were already in power, the verdict was already out and the Jews of Sighet were still smiling.” (Wiesel, 10) This line has been taken from Elie Wiesel's account of the Holocaust in which the unsuspecting Jews of Sighet, who knew everything about Hitler's promise but who lived in their houses of delusion, were forced to spend innumerable nights cramped up in ghettos, cattle carts and eventually, the concentration camps. It seemed like an appropriate beginning to the article because history has a way of repeating itself, in a spiral fashion. No event can take place in isolation. It has its echoes in social, political and economic arenas of the time. A number of people individuals and groups are affected by it and respond to it differently depending upon different factors. The tragedy that destroyed the lives of millions of Jews in the name of Nazi totalitarianism gave us an insight into the darkest side of human nature. But, as already stated, history has a peculiar power to replay itself in different contexts and with different dramatis personae. The Holocaust was followed by a number of tragedies, which were equally, if not more, horrific. The inflictors and the inflicted changed, the names of the countries facing the crisis were different but one thing remained constant Power. The purpose of this article is to better understand the silent yet potent power of the reigning ideology that manages our day to day activities.

In *The German Ideology*, Marx asserts that “ideology corresponds to the dominant ideas held by any particular society. These ideas are in evidence in every aspect of the society's culture and social organization- in its law, politics, religion, art and so on. They are always also the ideas of the ruling class, and serve to legitimize its wealth and power.” (Cuddon, 353) In Marxist terms, the dominant ideology is the result of the economic structure of the society. But, if we use the term in a broader way, ideology is something that constitutes human consciousness. It is the way through which “human beings perceive, and by recourse to which they explain, what they take to be reality.” (Abrams, 203) The role of the ruling ideology is to vigorously shun the alternative perspectives and to create binaries such as right and wrong or pure good and pure evil. It is because of such binaries that are accepted as 'natural' that countries like England insisted on the divine right of the Monarch to legitimize state-mandated violence against anybody who opposed the ruling ideology. The ideology of colonization is another example where the deep rooted sense of supremacy of the colonizing country made its subjects to undertake the burdensome task of 'civilizing' the natives by conquering them. The subjects thus produced tried to enforce this belief on the

natives by force as well as by subtler means like education. This ideology of supremacy of a particular race was so influential at that time that even the colonized accepted it to a certain extent.

Coming closer home, one can clearly witness the spread of the ruling ideologies through various state-apparatuses. It is more ostensible in a country like India which is home to people belonging to different castes, ethnicities and religions. Mrs. Indira Gandhi's term as the Prime Minister of India, The Babri Demolition, the Gujarat riots of 2002 are some examples through which one can understand how ideology interpellates individuals. According to Althusser, "there is no existence outside the ideological framework. The act of interpellation is based on a necessary illusion in which the subject retroactively gains awareness of the process." (Singh, 29) The power of the ruling ideology is so formidable that anything which opposes or deviates from the 'accepted' notion is considered as an act worthy of retribution. History is full of the names of great thinkers who were persecuted because they wanted to acquaint the masses with such discoveries that were totally against the commonly accepted beliefs. As the main purpose of the ruling ideology is to create binaries, the process of spreading the ideology cannot be limited to visible or recognizable sources. Various ideological state-apparatuses as well as cultural and social means are used to spread a particular ideology in order to gain power or to gain support of the targeted individuals and groups.

Creative representations play an important role in fanning out the dominant ideology. Shakespeare's famous play *Macbeth* highlighted the legitimate right of the king to use power against nonconformists but Macbeth's attempt to gain power was portrayed as pure evil and against the dominant ideology. The play was well received by the audience of that time because it was in tune with the ruling ideology of absolutism or of the divine right of the monarch. Similarly, one can take the example of the film *Firaaq* by Nandita Das. The film is based on the Gujarat riots, 2002 and tries to give voice to several unvoiced stories that have been buried under the debris of such a huge tragedy. The film does not justify violence and tries to present other perspectives through which the series of events can be seen. The movie was not very successful or well received by the audience because it refused to acknowledge the 'rightful' purpose of revenge. It is interesting to note that as the movie begins, two men can be seen piling up the bodies of the dead men, women, children alike. The heap of flesh reminds one of a number of documentaries made on Auschwitz and Buchenwald. It is not a coincidence that one tragedy automatically awakens one's memory of the others preceding it. The Germans who had identified themselves with Hitler's anti-Semitic sentiments followed him blindly. In case of Gujarat, the people belonging to the majority community, who were made to believe that they had serious threat from the minority community, conflated into the power called Mob. This mob was guided by an ideology that reverberated in their minds and that made things visible to them, only through the light of religion. Writer Dionne Bunsha has tried to show this ugly facet of power through her book *Scarred: Experiments With Violence In Gujarat*. The book presents the accounts of a number of victims who were sacrificed in the game of power. They were killed, raped, burnt, forced to abandon their homes and live as refugees because they were left to the justice of the mob.

Literature and other creative works produced under the influence of an epochal movement or a tragedy help one in understanding a particular event in an analytical manner. The accounts produced by a number of journalists after the riots or the violence also throw light on how one group is incited against the other through inflaming speeches, provocative slogans and baseless rumors. As the world has progressed, media, television and internet have started playing an important role in controlling the minds of the people. The news channels, television programmes, movies, short films, etc., play their parts in molding the psyche of the people and in propagating a certain perspective or world view. All these petty yet potent means of charging the psyche of a targeted group of people play a significant role in making the subjects believe in the self-self-righteousness of their purpose. As a result, their actions are guided by a sense of uprightness along with other factors. Any riot or pogrom does not take place out of impulse. It is true that a

trigger is required to spread the fire but it is largely the result of growing resentment that keeps simmering in the consciousness. There is no greater tragedy than the one where people knowingly imprison themselves in the cages of their own beliefs. There are two primary ways of exerting power. One is by force. This way is effective but there are chances of a number of rebellions. It is easier to rule the subjects by making them believe that however something is happening is the only way in which it should happen. To exert power in the most productive way, the collective conscious of an intended group needs to be carved into a desirable model. Both these ways of implementing power were exercised during the Nazi totalitarianism, Babri Demolition, Gujarat Riots, etc. and it is difficult to say if one can function without the help of the other. The two events the Holocaust and the Gujarat Riots are non-identical from each other in so many ways; one can be termed as ethnic cleansing while the other can be taken under the category of revenge killing. In both these events, the consequences in the form of human suffering remain the same where individuals were suddenly reduced from being humans to being the prey, ready to be devoured by the machinery of power and the subjects of the ruling ideology believed that whatever was happening was nothing but right and natural.

Another similar thing between the two tragedies is the burning or demolition of the religious places of the hunted group. Dionne Bunsha says that the easiest way to exercise power is to “start a riot. Fuel hatred. Divide people. Make them fear each other. Keeps the terror brewing” (Bunsha, 181). There is no better way to divide people than on the religious lines. In case of the Jews, synagogues were destroyed and in case of the Muslims, mosques were annihilated as these bred terrorists. Destruction of religious places to ignite the fire of hatred brings the Babri demolition to one's mind. It was the symbol of the power of religion and continues to be used as the trump card by political parties who aim to change the power equation.

One of the most effective ways to use the power of ideology is to persuade the subjects that the power is being used for their benefit, to secure their stronghold in the society. This kind of soft power is much more venomous because it makes the subjects participate in their own destruction. Power is used to impose a world view in order to tame and govern. While talking about the aim to govern, one is constantly reminded of the dystopian worlds that various writers have tried to depict in their novels. George Orwell's novel, *1984*, presents a world where the “Big Brother” watches every activity of the outer party members in order to tame their minds and make them believe that whatever is being showcased is the one and ultimate truth. There is severe penalty for digressing from the path shown by the Big Brother. The Nazi concentration camps were no different from these dystopias. Every human tragedy exposes the communities or countries involved to a world ruled by sheer power.

It is without doubt that every tragedy or riot is the result of a number of factors at work. Some causes capture the attention immediately while some remain hidden under the web. But, in Foucault's words, one thing which is true in all events is that “the individual is not a pre-given entity which is seized on by the exercise of power. The individual, with his identity and characteristics, is the product of a relation of power exercised over bodies, multiplicities, movements, desires, forces.”<sup>[1]</sup> According to Althusser, “the subject is what makes the ideology work.” (Singh, 29) The dominant ideology operates in such a way that even the state-sponsored violence seems as natural and is legitimized by the participation or consent of the masses.

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### End Notes

<sup>[1]</sup> <https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/50510-it-s-my-hypothesis-that-the-individual-is-not-a-pre-given>