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Resistance to ideologies: A study of Melville's "Bartleby the Scrivener"

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In this paper I address, from a different perspective, some of the pertinent semantic issues that come in readers' minds while reading Herman Melville's journey in "Bartleby the Scrivener." The journey in the story, examined from Althusserian perspective, demonstrates Bartleby's resistance and thus defies the functioning of ideology and ideological state apparatus. In other words, the story reveals how Bartleby risks his own life for resistance and thus reinforces the dynamics of struggle making us awake from the constraints of capitalism.

Herman Melville's short story "Bartleby the Scrivener" has been teasing the readers and critics since its publication as no agreed common point meaning has been reached. Frankly, its meaning has been as slippery as Derrida's *differance*. After all, why does Bartleby resist? Why passive resistance? Why not violent one? What does he resist against? Does his resistance have any goal? Does he not withdraw from the social life in his attempt to resist? Does not his refusal reflected on his famous expression "I'd prefer not to" lead him to his death? These are a few questions that the present paper will shed light on using Althusserian notion of ideology. As stated by Althusser, the ideologies of the ruling class reinforced by Ideological State Apparatuses (ISAs) and Repressive State Apparatuses (RSAs) dominate the whole nexus of *sociopoliticoculturaleconomic* factors. The reading of the text reveals Bartleby's resistance to ideology not only by withdrawing from the social reality permeated with ideologies but also by resisting the ideologies equally by turning himself into a commodity, a cold Xerox machine and death-in-life situation. Definitely, his resistance that costs him his own life is more significant than dragging his existence amidst indifference, isolation, fragmentation and suffocation of the society permeated with the ideologies.

The term ideology was coined by Cabanis, Desdutt de Tracy and their friends. Later, Marx used it in the sense of the system of ideas and representations which dominate the mind of a man or social group. Althusserian notion is one of the most significant offshoots of ideology in the contemporary discourses. “Ideology,” in Michael Moriarty’s reading of Althusser, “is there presented, not primarily as a matter of particular beliefs or ideas, but more as the foundation of all beliefs and all non-scientific ideas in general” (Moriarty, 2000, p. 44). Deriving from Lacan’s psychoanalytic model, Althusser explains how ideology maintains its hold over human beings by giving us illusion that it makes us whole. In the mirror stage, the child is confronted with the mirror image that the world gives back to it. It is not about real mirror (or there may be one, but it does not make any difference). That image, just like the image reflected on the mirror, is a distortion that leads the child to misrecognition. However, the misrecognition is the basis for what we see as our identity. We need the response of others or the Other to arrive at what we experience as our identity. Our identity is construed in interaction with others, who resemble us in one way or other but are irrevocably different. This other might not be a concrete individual (it may be embodied in father or mother) but the larger social order. As our identity is constituted through interaction with what is out of us and thus reflects us: it is relational in the sense that the structure in which we find ourselves situates us individuals. As the sociocultural and personal configurations change, our identity, too, changes. Therefore, the identity is not fixed and stable. Identity is subject to constant change and incoherence, and thus it is a process. With the transition from the Imaginary to Symbolic via Mirror, we are subject to language and reason, and thus lose a feeling of wholeness that haunts us forever. This very lack leads to the rise of desire, a longing that can never be fulfilled but can be temporarily satisfied with symbolic substitution. The processes we undergo while we grow up leave us forever incomplete. Because of the realization of this deep lack, we yearn for completion. And we turn to ideology for completion. Ideology, in such a critical situation, sounds more charming as it hails and

interpellates us as already concrete subjects. In a way, it makes us feel as if we are already complete. Right here, Althusser's first thesis works. He, in his essay "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses", argues, "Ideology represents the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real condition of existence" (Althusser, 1999, p. 123). In short, ideology distorts our view of our true conditions of existence. His second thesis argues that "Ideology has a material existence" (Althusser, 1999, p. 125). All the ideologies are material actions inserted into material practices in material institutions like schools, colleges, churches, cultural heritages, museums and theatre houses. According to him, there are two kinds of state apparatuses: Repressive State Apparatuses (RSAs) and Ideological State Apparatuses (ISAs). RSAs consist of law, police and army. So, the RSAs work through violence. ISAs consist of education system, religious institution, the legal system, political system and so on. The ISAs work through ideology. The RSAs are public whereas ISAs are private. However, this division is not a watertight division. Both consist of the elements of each other. The ISAs use violence, i.e., proper way of punishment. Likewise, the police and army are equally ideological. It is just a matter of degree.

"Ideology", according to Althusser, "interpellates individuals as subjects" (Althusser, 1999, p. 136). It interpellates us in different social roles we occupy by creating a subject position we are already familiar with. In this manner, ideology convinces us that we are whole and real, and we are the concrete subjects we want to be. That's why we see whatever ideology projects as belonging to natural harmonious order of things. Ironically, the subjects are free in the sense that they are free to submit themselves to ideologies. With this understanding of Althusserian notion of ideology, the text in question has been analyzed.

Let us compare Nipper, Turkey and Ginger Nut, and the lawyer to Bartleby. The lawyer, as an employer, has been able to call them by their nicknames. Most probably, he has created these

nicknames to have his hold over them. The lawyer, however, fails to create any nickname for Bartleby. In a way, Bartleby resists to the capitalist profit making machine embodied by the narrator whereas other employees are subject to the ideologies. They seem to be satisfied with their roles. They look complacent and, they behave as if they are subjects on their own forgetting their own reification as these words of narrator illustrate: "It was not a very arduous office, but very pleasantly remunerative. I seldom lose my temper; much more seldom indulge in dangerous indignation at wrongs and outrages ..." (Melville, 1995, p. 909). References to Jonathan Edwards and Joseph Priestley also project him as a fatalist and complacent bourgeoisie. Susan Weiner, in her article "Bartleby: Representation, reproduction and law", claims, "Bartleby emerges as a challenge to everything the lawyer unquestionably accepts. The lawyer's constant motion and activity are arrested by Bartleby's inflexibility and stasis. The lawyer's earnestness is thwarted by the copyist's passivity" (Weiner, 1994, p. 68). His passivity, however, is his way to react. L. Rosenblatt, in her article "The limits of pity in *Bartleby* and *Moby Dick*", asserts it in these words: "He reacts more than acts" (Rosenblatt, 2008, p. 61).

Bartleby is conspicuously different from these employees and his employer. His silence tells us volumes. He has undergone the suffocation, indifference, alienation, exploitation and reification while being a cog in the capitalist machine. Analyzing the suffocation alienation of Bartleby from the architectural perspective, George Dargo, in his article "Bartleby, the Scrivener: 'A House Like Me'", argues, "Bartleby is surrounded by and embedded in walls and screens to such an extent that he can be heard but hardly ever seen" (Dargo, 2010, p. 819). He, therefore, dares to challenge their beliefs and values. "The advent of Bartleby," as per Susan Weiner, "temporarily threatens his habits of thought and writing by contradicting his suppositions and beliefs" (Weiner, 1994, p. 72). Daniel Paliwada, in his book *Melville and the Theme of Boredom*, reflects over Bartleby's protest in this way:

Bartleby is a man whose soul hungers. Not only is he starving himself of food- ginger nuts are only thing he seems to eat occasionally, if at all- he gains no spiritual nourishment from the capitalist system he lives in. He apparently buys nothing, rents nothing, consumes nothing, and ultimately performs nothing, and his expression of choice, indicates that he will not conform, accomodate, or obey the life-robbing enterprises of Wall Street. (Paliwada, 2010, 146)

Paliwada makes it clear that Bartleby has started this passive resistance as he has realized the spiritual hollowness that results from the capitalist system.

“All who know me,” the narrator says, “consider me eminently *safe* man” (Melville, 1995, p. 908). This *safe* also refers to his commitment to normative social values upheld by ideologies. As the *safe* is in italics, there is every possibility that the narrator is being sarcastic and critical towards himself because of the realization he undergoes after witnessing the life of Bartleby. Thomas Ribek, in his article “The ‘Safe’ Man of Wall Street: Characterizing Melville’s Lawyer,” argues, “He avoids criminal work and juries but is ironically something of a prisoner himself to Wall Street Values- as confined mentally and emotionally as Bartleby is physically jailed” (Ribek, 1986, p. 192). He has succumbed to the ideologies.

There is a tinge of resistance even when Bartleby works like a machine in the beginning. The lawyer expression, “I should have been quite delighted with his application, had he been cheerfully industrious” hints at the resistance (Melville, 1995, p. 913). His silence, paleness and mechanism sound rather disturbing to his employer. In a way, Bartleby embodies the evil effects of the capitalist money making machine. He projects how this machine sucks blood of the proletarians and turns them into lifeless cold machines. Sometimes, he emerges as a Xerox machine. “Although seemingly famished,” according to Susan Weiner, “he gorges himself on documents as if the proper food for automation were the codes that created him”

 (Weiner, 1994, pp. 67-68). This kind of foregrounding of evil effects is also a form of Bartleby's resistance to ideologies of capitalism.

When the narrator wants Bartleby to cooperate him in examining a small paper, Bartleby refuses. The narrator, as he has submitted himself to ideologies, cannot even imagine resistance from an insignificant employee like Bartleby: "Imagine my surprise, nay my consternation, when, without moving from his privacy, Bartleby, in a singularly mild, firm voice, replied, 'I would prefer not to'" (Melville, 1995, p. 914). Bartleby's expression 'I would prefer not to' turns the narrator "into a pillar of salt" (Melville, 1995, p. 914). He cannot even imagine that things happen differently than the way he, as guided by ideologies, thinks them to happen.

Turky, Nipper and Ginger Nut also join the bandwagon of their employer. They are also greatly disturbed by Bartleby's conduct. They, too, find him strange and are enraged. Ginger Nut thinks that Bartleby is "a little *lunny*" (Melville, 1995, p. 915). J. Hillis Miller, in his article "A Deconstructive Reading of Melville's Bartleby, the Scrivener", reinforces the same in this manner: "One powerful means society has for dealing with someone who does not fit any ordinary social category is to declare him insane" (Miller, 1995, p. 1462). All the same, Bartleby keeps on resisting these agents of capitalism. The employer notices that Bartleby is resisting him: "Nothing so aggravates an earnest person as a passive resistance" (Melville, 1995, p. 916). Having already bespectacled with ideologies, he does not understand how to bring Bartleby back to the track set by ideologies. Finally, he decides to give Bartleby a permanent shelter in his office. Actually, he wants to turn his difficulty into an act of compassion as guided by his religious faith: Christianity. However, he fails in this mission as Bartleby's presence starts offending his partners, friends and customers. Bartleby's silent resistance drives the narrator out of that house. He wants to take Bartleby with him to which Bartleby answers 'I'd prefer not to.' Laying emphasis on the stubbornness of

Bartleby, Howe Darcus, in his article “The Deadly Existence of a Quiet Man”, compares Bartleby with Dhiren Barot, an Islamist fundamentalist: “He would not swerve an inch from the path he had set himself. Here lies similarity with Barot” (Darcus, 2006, p. 27). Thus, he stays in the same house. But the landlord cannot bear him and hence gets Bartleby arrested. Bartleby is sent to prison. “Bartleby”, as argued by Miller, “is appropriately placed in the Tombs since, if the prison courtyard where Bartleby dies is green life in the midst of death, Bartleby has been death in the midst of life” (Miller, 1995, p. 1462). The imprisonment is the manifestation of the fact that he is not an appropriate person to live in the society simply because he does not submit himself to ideologies.

Bartleby maintains his resistance in another way as well. He refuses to have his food in the prison house. Even when the narrator arranges care and good food, Bartleby ignores the narrator’s sympathetic gesture. Miller argues, “There is much emphasis on eating in the story, on what the narrator’s different employees eat and drink and on how little Bartleby eats, apparently nothing at all in prison” (Miller, 1995, p.1462). All the other employees except Bartleby eat and drink sumptuously. And his reluctance to eating reaches to the peak when he stops eating anything in the prison. “Eating,” according to Miller, “is one of the basic ways to share our common humanity. This Bartleby refuses, or rather he says he would prefer not to share in the ritual of eating” (Miller, 1995, p. 1462). He knows that the common humanity refers to followers of the ideologies, which have wrecked him. He stops eating in order to resist such people and their ideologies.

The narrator asks Bartleby to go out of his cell to see the grass, tree and sky to which Bartleby refuses to go out. He gets himself confined to the four walls of the cell. Indeed, the story is replete with the imageries of various kinds of walls. These imageries, too, project the resistance since they make us see how Bartleby is confined within the walls of his subjectivity, which he does not want to bring out to the society. When the

narrator tells Bartleby that it is a nice place to be, Bartleby replies, "I know where I am" (Melville, 1995, p. 932). It also shows Bartleby has not gone crazy the way other people including the narrator think. He has been able to resist the capitalist ideology, which labels any person abnormal when s/he does not follow the ordinary (again, ideologies determine what it means it to be ordinary) way of life.

In his next visit to Bartleby after a few days, he finds Bartleby dead. Bartleby's death disconcerts him. Though he does not understand how Bartleby has bared the capitalism through his resistance even at the death, this death makes him come out of his bourgeoisie complacency. He becomes ready to empathize with Bartleby. He relates the fate of Bartleby to that of the whole humanity in this manner: "Ah, Bartleby! Ah, humanity!" (Melville, 1995, p. 934). It is an indirect acceptance of the fact each person has got to meet such a pathetic end in the capitalistic social structure. His death is a stunning gesture as claimed by Miller: "Bartleby is the invasion of death into life, but not death as something from outside life" (Miller, 1995, p. 1463). In a way, his "death makes him what he has been living all along, a bit of death in the midst of life" (Miller, 1995, p. 1462). Bartleby has his voice through his passive resistance when he is alive. His death only reinforces his voice of resistance, which makes us awake from the slumber of complacency and conformity of capitalism. Weiner sheds light on this aspect of Bartleby's death in this way: "Bartleby's refusal not only threatens the foundations of personal identity but also undermines the basis of society as represented by the Wall Street world" (Weiner, 1994, p. 71).

Conclusion

It is conspicuous that the lawyer tries to obliterate the threat of Bartleby's passive resistance by getting the latter absorbed into some parts of his ideologies (IRAs) like business, fatalistic philosophy, Christianity, clerkship and others. When the lawyer attempts to make some tangible meaning out of Bartleby so that he could have control over Bartleby, he eventually fails to make Bartleby conform to the desired ideologies. As soon as Bartleby is imprisoned, the police and law (RSAs) come forth to force him to conform to the ideologies, to be a cog in the capitalist machine. Again, Bartleby resists the law as well as police force by refusing to eat food. He manages to resist the ideologies at the cost of his life. He has presented himself as a cold machine, death-in-life situation and a lump of trash to show the evil effects of these capitalist ideologies. And what about his death? It has enabled the ideology ridden narrator (and the audience, of course) to realize the evil effects of the ideologies prevalent in the capitalist society. Bartleby's death is the highest point of his resistance to capitalist ideologies.

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