

‘The Whole is Untrue’: False consciousness in *Overcoat* by Ghulam Abbas

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ABSTRACT

*The concept of false consciousness emerged in the works of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels while describing a capitalist society wherein individuals from lower class are conditioned to live against their self interests. The capitalist class asserts its personal interests by manipulating and misleading the subordinate class in such a way that they accept their ideological conditioning as customary and natural. Capitalism sustains misconceptions by exploiting the lower strata in order to represent itself as super structure that ensures common goodness in the society. In 20th century, various political thinkers such as Althusser, Marcuse and Jost broadened its definition to explain the actions and behaviors of all members of society, including those from lower or subordinate classes. The present research attempts to analyze the Marxian concept of false consciousness in *Overcoat* by Ghulam Abbas. The present research is carried out to analyze the behaviour of the people belonging to lower strata of Pakistani society with specific reference to their socio-economic conditioning. In this way, the study will be significant to create awareness for the reflective and insightful writings produced by the Pakistani writers. The present study aims to analyze the concept of false consciousness and to determine the causes and consequences of false beliefs which sustain the social status by evaluating the behaviour of the characters presented in the text. The paper concludes that the characters from subordinate classes accept its unequal social conditioning as natural phenomenon and are engaged against their self interests to attain the idealized mode of life.*

Keywords: False Consciousness, Capitalism, Social Conditioning, Ideology.

INTRODUCTION

The concept of false consciousness is contextualized in the works of Marx and Engels while theorizing Capitalism. According to this theorization, a society is based on economic pursuits wherein the capital class constructs human consciousness by conditioning them to an ideological social life. This procedure is conducted in a natural way with an integration of myth from reality. The ruling class exercises its dominance and power by manipulating the mental faculty of humans. The procedure formulates consciousness of the lower class to demonstrate the flattering interests of the upper class that eventually guarantee its economic stability and dominance in the society. As a result, the

economically instable class engages itself in an unending struggle to achieve the idealized material stability that is proposed by the dominant class. Thus, the control over consciousness is a powerful ideological tool used by the ruling class to demonstrate its authority over lower class.

Unlike less ambiguous Marxian concepts, false consciousness has not had much academic literature devoted specifically to its study. Some scholars have briefly evoked the issue, but very few extensive analyses have been conducted. In order to accomplish this, the conceptual development of false consciousness will be analyzed in this study from a critical Marxist perspective. At its center is a historical account of the intellectual background from which the theory of false consciousness has emerged.

Overcoat, a short story by Ghulam Abbas addresses the false consciousness of the lower middle class of Pakistan. The current study evaluates the behaviour, ideas and beliefs of the characters in the light of different writings of critical Marxist theorists as Althusser, Marcuse and Jost.

The concept of false consciousness has its roots in the field of psychology where Sigmund Freud first identified consciousness in relation with society and reality principle. This concept is further evaluated by Lacan with specific reference to the false and illusive social and reality constructions of the society.

The ideas of Lacan were first taken into consideration by a Marxist critic Louis Althusser to understand the behaviour of the people in the context of capitalist ideology. Marx and Engels are the key proponents of the concept who regard false consciousness as a synonymous term to ideology and only applicable to intellectuals, or to capitalists. However, Herbert Marcuse and John Jost have expanded this interpretation of Marx by arguing that false consciousness is not limited to the bourgeoisie but affect the members of the working class and society as a whole. In the present study this expansion of the idea is analyzed in *Overcoat* by Ghulam Abbas.

LITERATURE REVIEW

While experimenting on human psyche to resolve the ills of his patients, Sigmund Freud divides human mind into two distinct levels; the conscious and the unconscious. Conscious is based on human perceptions and sensations that are being experienced by an individual at any given moment. Freud calls 'unconsciousness as indispensable quality of psyche' (Freud, 2008, p. 131).

Since it moulds as well as regulates the personality according to the norms and dictations of the external world. This distinctive feature of consciousness exposed by Freud emphasizes that 'consciousness is the thing in itself' of which the body is merely an appearance (Smith, 1999, p. 22). If consciousness is only meant for 'psyche', then it means that 'psychology's only function is to distinguish within psychic phenomenology between perception, emotion, thought process, and willful acts' (Smith, 1999, p. 29). Such a distinction is based on the functioning of consciousness as a mediatory force between the instinctive desires and the socially prescribed ethics. The society to which consciousness subdues restricts it to fulfill the instinctual commands therefore they needed to be oppressed and forgotten as 'civilized humans, primitive thoughts such as lust, hatred, and greed were unacceptable and as such were not consciously acknowledged' (Kokoszka, 2007, p. 71). The oppression of these urges cannot be assumed as exclusion or elimination instead they are moved to the unconsciousness of the mind that is 'an organizational entity, which serves and anticipates the needs of the consciousness' (Kokoszka, 2007, p. 72). The unconsciousness is a storehouse of the suppressed desires, fears and memories that some way or the other finds a way out to the consciousness through slips of tongues, free association and dreams. It works on pleasure instincts whereas consciousness also referred to ego, works over realism and social demands by repressing but also facilitating the demands of the unconscious.

That the ego represents the organized part of the psyche in contrast to the unorganized elements of the unconscious (the id) and argues: the ego is that part of the id that has been modified by direct influence of the external world.... The ego represents what may be called reason and common sense, in contrast to the id, which contains the passions. (Hall, 2004, p. 61)

The ego stands for the consciousness by focusing on the needs of the society but it also intends to accommodate the repressed desires of the unconsciousness. The unacceptable desires, memories and fears that are once moved into the unconscious are facilitated by the consciousness under the feasibility of the environment. It is the time when it is difficult to trace a dividing line between the consciousness and the unconscious (Erwin, 2002). The consciousness is the acceptable mode of personality before society and its institutions by implementing reality principle.

However, Lacan restates the unconsciousness in terms of Symbolic Order by viewing consciousness in association with Imaginary Order. He develops these notions while observing the development of an infantile. He believes that unconscious comes into being when a child acquires language. The acquisition of language teaches him the rules and regulations that he applies in order to exist in the world (Tyson, 2006, p. 26). Lacan associates linguistic devices of Metaphor and Metonymy to the unconscious world in order to explain the element of 'absence', 'loss' and 'lack' that an individual experiences when he finds himself in the world of 'incompleteness', unfulfillment and the 'Other' (Qazi, 2011). As Lacan puts it 'the unconscious is structured like a language' (Tyson, 2006, p. 29). He calls this stage of development the symbolic order wherein the child begins to see the world beyond his control. His existence in imaginary order is complete and absolute since he belongs to his mother and his mother belongs to him. The child's preverbal feelings of this absolute union with his mother and control over the world is illusive and referred to as the 'Desire of the Mother' that continues until the child acquires language (p. 27). Lacan identifies this stage with consciousness that is the real and complete world:

The imaginary phase is one of unity (between the child and its), as well as of immediate possession (of mother and objects), a condition of reassuring of plenitude, a world consisting wholly of images (hence "imaginary") that is not fragmented or mediated by difference, by categories, in a word, by language and signs. (Habib 2008, p. 91)

However, as soon as he enters the Symbolic order he experiences a systematic world that is out of command in which he recognizes his mother belongs to his father that is termed as the Name of the Father. Such a recognition separates him from his mother and the eventual feelings that he experiences is the loss of his mother and their ultimate union. This experience of loss and unfulfillment haunts the child throughout his life and he finds different great or small substitutes for it by spending his life unconsciously in the 'Symbolic Order' (Tyson, 2006, p. 28). The unconscious represses the desire of the ultimate union of his mother and realizes that, 'this new world is one in which there are rules we must obey and restrictions by which we must abide' (p. 31). This world has other people who have their own desires and fears, as Lacan asserts:

What is my desire? What is my position in the imaginary structuration? This position is only conceivable in so far as one finds a guide beyond the imaginary, on the level of the symbolic plane, of the legal exchange which can only be embodied in the verbal exchange between human beings. (cited in Boothby, 1991, p. 108)

Lacan describes Desire as a desire for the other and it belongs to the external world wherein we experience 'primordial lack':

Desire is a relation of being to lack. This lack is the lack of being properly speaking. It isn't the lack of this or that, but lack of being whereby the being exists. This lack is beyond anything which can represent it. It is only ever represented as a reflection on a veil. (cited in Boothby, 1991, p. 113)

It shows that Symbolic order is an incomplete world in which the individual is striving to meet perfection however he identifies the impossibility of his reunion with the absoluteness and completeness. This entrance in the incomplete world of symbolic order is referred to the entrance in the societal order in which he has to suppress his desire of reunion to live according to the rules and regulations prescribed by the society in order to live an acceptable life (Furth, 1996, p. 135). Thus, the societal beliefs, values, social constructions, culture, ideologies, language all are synonymous of what Lacan calls Symbolic order:

The Other, Society, Law, the set of Hypotheses within which the Subject is constituted is not an imaginary object but a representation of representations, and therefore belongs in the Symbolic and yet, as a realm of language...the unconscious, on the other hand, is entirely a thing of symbolic... this order works as a constraint and can be found in pacts of alliance, religious rituals, prohibitions and taboos; it is also universal to all human society. (Bailly, 2009, p. 94)

It illustrates that Symbolic order is the social order that through repression attempts to control the lives of the individuals. Lacan coins the term 'Real' that is impossible because it is impossible for an individual to deconstruct the ideological sphere of the Symbolic Order. He identifies Symbolic Order as a veil to the 'Real'. The Symbolic Order is:

“A cut in the real”, in the process of signification: “it is the world of words that creates the world of things— things originally confused in the “here and now” of the all in the process of coming into being. (Qazi, 2011, p. 10)

The real is recognition of the meaninglessness of the imperfect world of the symbolic order that attempts to control and suppress an individual from the world of perfection and the ‘real’. The real is ‘a level of brute reality that never reaches consciousness without being filtered through representation that mediate and organize our sensory experiences’, therefore the existence in which an individual exists is an ‘ineffable and stupid existence’ (Shepherdson, 2008, p. 29). Tyson (2006) observes the Real ‘as that which is beyond all meaning — making systems that which lies outside the world created by the ideologies society uses to explain existence (p. 32). Thus, Lacan assumes the symbolic Order as the unconscious force that should be suppressed in order to unveil the Real existence of an individual.

Louis Althusser perceives the world through Lacanian lenses by extending the theoretical vision of Symbolic Order. The individual’s entrance into the Symbolic phase is an entrance to the world of ideology; the world that an individual constructs around him and that is beyond ‘Real’. Though it is difficult to perceive the ultimate ‘Real’, however, through critical apprehension of these ideological premises, an individual can recognize the complex immersion of these constructed processes. He makes a series of hypotheses to extend the vision of ‘Real’: he says that, ‘ideology represents the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence’ (Althusser, 2001, p. 109). It elucidates that ideology does not reflect the ‘Real’ world instead it depicts ‘imaginary relationship of individuals’ before the world. Ideology is, thus, the portrayal of imaginary instead of the ‘Real’. Althusser asserts that Ideology is based on ‘material existence’ because it exists in ‘an apparatus and its practices or practices’ (p. 112). He exemplifies Pascal’s formula of ‘religious ideological state apparatus’ as: ‘Kneel down, move your lips in prayer and you will believe’ (p. 114). He argues that through ideological state apparatuses the individual is interpellated by ideology as ‘concrete subjects’:

The individual is interpellated as a (free) subject in order that he shall submit freely to the commandments of the Subject, i.e. in order that he shall (freely) accept his subjection, i.e. in order

that he shall make the gestures and actions of his subjection 'all by himself' (p. 123).

He continues that the individuals are born subjects by relating this idea with Lacan's notion of the Name of the Father:

It is certain in advance that it will bear its Father's Name, and will therefore have an identity and be irreplaceable. Before its birth, the child is therefore always-already a subject, appointed as a subject in and by the specific familial ideological configuration in which it is 'expected' once it has been conceived (p. 119)

It can be said that the individual is born in the world of ideology that does not mean to be a world of perfection instead it is the world of assumptions and misrepresentations of what is called the 'Real'. Thus, it can be asserted that ideologies that intend to regulate the lives of individuals as subjects are in reality the false beliefs, values, culture and social norms that through social, religious, political ideological tools work to interpellate these subjects so that they cannot break the 'Symbolic' sphere and look beyond what is the 'Real'.

The word ideology refers to a combination of preconceived notions as Terry Eagleton explicates it as 'false ideas which help to legitimate a dominant political power', and it is a process in which 'the social life is converted to a natural reality' (Eagleton, 1991, p. 1-2).

While examining Althusser's interpretation it is observed that ideology perceives its existence on material structures. Marx and Engels (1846) define ideology as the 'means of material production' that 'has control at the same time over the means of mental production' (p. 64). Engels continues his definition of ideology by asserting that 'Ideology is a process accomplished by the so-called thinker consciously, it is true, but with a false consciousness. The real motive forces impelling him remain unknown to him; otherwise it simply would not be an ideological process' (Engels, 1968). It shows that ideology serves the material benefits by reflecting the interests of the dominant group in the society by manipulating the consciousness of the subordinate group of individuals. Marx and Engels argued that in history people 'have constantly made up for themselves false conceptions about themselves, about what they are and what they ought to be,' and the call was sounded to 'liberate them from the chimeras, the ideas, the dogmas, the imaginary beings under the yoke of

which they are pinning away' (1846, p. 37). This view was elaborated by Vladimir Lenin later argued:

People always have been the foolish system of deception and self deception in politics, and they always will be until they will learnt to seek out the interests of some class or other behind or other behind all moral religious, political and all social phrases, declarations and promises (cited in Lorimer, 2006, p. 139)

The world in which an individual lives is based on the material benefits and its economy and thus, the lives of the individuals are determined according to their economic circumstances. It is structured on the means of productions and the methods it uses to produce material elements of life. The society divides people into those who own property, and thereby control the means of production, the bourgeoisie, and those who are controlled by them, the proletariat, are the workers whose labor produces their wealth. Because those who control production have a power base, they have many ways to ensure that they will maintain their position: 'healthy social being will produce a healthy social consciousness' and 'therefore, can designate true and false consciousness', in addition to that 'it is bourgeois consciousness which is false and socialist consciousness which is true' (Wetter, 1969, p. 177). The term false consciousness is a tool of manipulating the proletariat in order to assert the power and control of the bourgeois within the society. The bourgeois construct the thinking patterns of the proletariat in such a way that they begin to subdue whatever has been said to them. Hence, 'through institutional control over education, religion, media, culture, and economic systems, dominant groups in society were capable of spreading ideas which serve to justify inequalities of status and power' (Jost, 1995, p. 398).

The bourgeois class engages the working class in a number of rules and regulations by delivering a number of prescriptions to assert what they are and what they are supposed to be. False consciousness is an amalgamation of false and inaccurate beliefs of the economically unstable class to perpetuate their oppression by the upper strata of society at social, economical and political level. Gyorgy Lukacs and Herbert Marcuse interpret false consciousness as not restricted to the bourgeois but also the proletariat and society as a whole is influenced by it. Jost (1995) prescribes two criteria for defining false consciousness, first, the belief must be "false" in the epistemological sense of

being contrary to fact' and the second is that 'it must be "false" in the sense of failing to reflect one's genuine social interests' by combining the two criteria together false consciousness can be defined as 'the holding of false or inaccurate beliefs that are contrary to one's own social interest and which thereby contribute to the maintenance of the disadvantaged position of the self or the group' (p. 400).

By serving the interests of the upper strata of the society instead of the shared interests of the whole society, false consciousness cannot be regarded as a positive tool to perpetuate equality, comfort, freedom in the society in spite of that it 'leads to the development of "needs which perpetuate toil, aggressiveness, misery, and injustice' (Marcuse, 1964, p. 5). False consciousness can be referred to as a theory of the 'production of a type of consciousness that is defective or inadequate in the sense of impeding rather than assisting an agent's rational reaction to its own circumstances' (Redding, 2000, p. 990). The dominant class conditions human consciousness to assert its ideas that eventually integrates myth from reality as Marx and Engels put it:

The ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas, i.e. the class which is the ruling material force of society, is at the same time its ruling intellectual force. The class which has the means of material production at its disposal, has control at the same time over the means of mental production, so that thereby, generally speaking, the ideas of those who lack the means of mental production are subject to it. (1846, p. 64)

The control over human consciousness guarantees the ruling class its economic stability and power in the society. Moving back to Lacan's idea of unconscious that is much more synonymous to false consciousness, it can be said that the world in which an individual exists is a combination of ideologies, values and beliefs that are working as a veil to the world of the 'Real', however, it is not about every individual to unveil that 'Real' world instead individuals spend their life without even recognizing the truth of these constructed ideologies. False consciousness is a manipulating tool that is used by the dominant class to exercise their motives but individuals cannot comprehend that they are victimized by the ideologies of the dominant lot of the society, as Crosby (1980) puts it:

...we must not measure the need for social reform by how upset people feel with their personal situations in life. Karl Marx was right about false consciousness: those who are oppressed or disadvantaged rarely have a well-developed sense of their own disadvantage. (cited in Jost, 1995, p. 405)

False consciousness is a false and illusive state of life wherein the subjects from the lower strata are wishfully submitting themselves before the material benefits of the upper strata by choosing false identities. These false beliefs and illusions of the people are shaped by a capitalist class in order to motivate individuals to act against their self interests. Thus, false consciousness is identified when people accept their status within a society by sustaining oppressions and injustices without even knowing the underlying bourgeois ideology for the maintenance of status quo.

ANALYSIS OF *OVERCOAT*

Overcoat is a short story in which the author has narrated an accident of a 'well-groomed young man' who walked up in a Saturday evening. His appearance reveals that he belongs to an elite class as the author describes:

He had put on a brown overcoat with a cream coloured half opened rose in his button hole and a green flat hat which he wore at a rakish angle. A white silk scarf was knotted at his neck. (Abbas, 2014, p. 87)

The author keeps on describing the overcoat of the young man that symbolizes his class and social status. The 'brown' overcoat is 'of good quality. The lapels were stiff and the sleeves well creased. The buttons were of horn, big and shiny' (p. 87). The young man observes other people who are wearing overcoat to protect themselves from the cold and chilled evening of January as 'most of them were wearing overcoats which were of every kind from the astrakham to the rough military khaki such as are found in large bundles at the secondhand clothes' shops' (p. 87).

The story predicts a clear picture of the society that is divided into two main classes the lower class and the upper one. The young man apparently belongs to the upper class who is chased by the lower class as 'taxi drivers' and 'tonga wallas', shop keepers and hawkers as a source of their income.

He looked such a dandy that tonga wallas on catching sight of him, even from a distance, whipped up their horses and raced towards him.... A taxi also drew near him and the driver looked at him enquiringly...

The class conflict is presented in the story when the 'taxi drivers', 'tonga wallas', labourers and hawkers gather outside a restaurant and try to enjoy an orchestra playing inside. They cannot go inside due to the inavailability of material sources but by smelling the food and listening to 'foreign' music they manage to satisfy themselves. The young man also stands there for a while but then he moves on to a music shop and observes the foreign music instruments displayed in showcase and observes their prices. Instead of buying something he asks for a list of 'month's gramophone records' (p. 88). His investigation of the prices and demanding the gramophone details render his interest in music. He then moves to a carpet shop where he again observes the price lists, however his walk ends when a 'a truck full of bricks came from behind like a gust of wind and crushing him down and speeded off towards Mcloed Road' (p. 89).

He dies as he reaches hospital but the blood stained brown overcoat could not conceal his social status. As his coat is taken off, the reality is also exposed:

The first to be removed was the white silk scarf. Beneath the scarf there was neither a tie nor a collar, nor even a shirt.... underneath only an old old cotton sweater which was all in holes... the socks, in colour and pattern and pattern the one was quite different from the other. (p. 90)

The total amount that the hospital administration found in his pocket was 'six annas'. The amount that is inside his pocket and the change that he was asking from 'pan wala' that was of 'ten rupees' reveal that his appearance contradicts his reality. His dialogues and overcoat symbolize his desire to be a rich man. This desire becomes evident at the time of his observation of the carpets, and the smooth touch of a carpet instigates his desire of comfortable and luxurious lifestyle.

The inaccessible price of the carpet shows the reality that he cannot achieve that status by wearing an overcoat. After this realization he does not visit any other shop but chooses to randomly walk on as a pedestrian.

The author sheds light on this contradiction when the young man pretends to be from elite class. He asks for the change of a ten-rupee bill and shows his

distrust when the 'pan wala' offers him that he can fetch change for him. The contradiction between his real social status and the pretended one embodies the intense dividing line between the two classes. The behaviour of the upper class sitting inside the restaurants and wearing expensive warm clothes compels the lower class like the young man in overcoat to be like them, however, some fulfill this desire by smelling outside and others pretend to be like them.

CONCLUSION

False consciousness is a Marxian concept that elucidates the behaviour of the people who are materialistically conditioned within a society. The character study of *Overcoat* by Ghulam Abbas reveals a society that is evidently divided into two main classes the ruling class and the working class. The author through the character of an unnamed young man sheds light on the behaviour of the people belonging to lower strata of the society.

It has been evaluated that the characters who belong to lower class are isolated in the society and work as servants and facilitators of the upperclass. The dividing line between the two classes asserts the indifferent attitude of the upper class that causes alienation and segregation which eventually leads the people of the lower strata to accept their social conditions on the basis of their economic instability. The economic conditioning within the society affects the people from the lower class to accept their status but if they find a space to fill up this gap of indifference they will not be reluctant to give up this chance.

Thus, it is concluded that the lower class that is shown in the story confronts the indifference on the material basis. Their social conditioning enforces them to work in a particular condition that in some way or the other facilitates the upper class. People of the lower class strive hard to diffuse this division but the upper class manages to maintain their status by raising their level of conditioning and the only way that is left for the lower strata is to do what the young man chooses to do.

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