

Althusser's Theory of Ideology and Puig's Kiss of the Spider Woman^(*)

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المخلص

ورواية قبلة المرأة العنكبوت نظرية الإيديولوجيا

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قسم اللغة الانجليزية و آدابها كلية اللغات و الترجمة

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في مساهمته الهامة في النظرية الإيديولوجية ، أبداع لويس ألتوسر ما سماه "أجهزة السلطة القمعية" ويعني بها الطرق التي تتحكم بها السلطة في العامة وتشمل الشرطة الجيش والنظام القضائي، وبالمقابل هناك ما يسمى بـ"أجهزة السلطة الأيديولوجية" ويدخل ضمنها مجالات مثل التعليم ، والثقافة ، ووسائل الإعلام و نحوها من الأمور التي تلعب دورا مهما في حياة الأسر.

يستعرض بحثي إمكانية تطبيق نظرية ألتوسر على رواية قبلة المرأة العنكبوت لمانويل بينغ ، وكيف تسمح لنا هذه النظرية بفهم مصطلحات مثل "السلطة" و "الاستجابة" و"الاستنساخ" في الرواية المعنية. ساتبع كل هذا في الرواية.

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Abstract

In his important contribution to ideological theory, Louis Althusser develops what he terms Ideological State Apparatuses (ISAs) in contrast to what he calls Repressive State Apparatuses (RSAs). RSAs are ways in which the state controls people directly through established and institutionalized means such as the police, the armed forces, and the penal system and so on. ISAs are different in that they are not directly or extremely imposed forms of ideological repression but rise from within the society. They include areas such as education, culture, the media, the various conventions of the family life, etc.

My paper will explore the applicability of Althusser's theory to Manual Puig's Kiss of the Spider Woman, and how this theory may allow us to understand terms like "power," "interpellation" and "reproduction" in the novel in question. I will examine how the novel lets us perceive the very ideology in which it is held.

Key words:

Althusser, apparatuses, ideology, Manual Puig, Kiss of the Spider Woman.

Valentin: No, the man of the house and the woman of the house have to be equal with one another. If not, their relation becomes a form of exploitation (Manual Puig 244).

In his essay, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses" (1971), the French philosopher Louis Althusser states that "ideology is a representation [an image, a myth, an idea or concept, depending on the case] of the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence" (162). These imaginary relationships should be interpreted in order to make sense of our relationship to the real world. In his essay, Althusser develops the concept of ideology through what he terms Ideological State Apparatuses (ISAs), in contrast to what he calls Repressive State Apparatuses (RSAs).

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established and institutionalized means such as the police, the armed forces, the penal system, and so on. ISAs are different in that they are not directly or extremely imposed forms of ideological repression but rise from within society. They include areas such as education, culture, the media, the various traditions of family life, etc. Both RSAs and ISAs act together on the individual as a subject.

ISAs appear to be natural and freely chosen, possessing what Althusser calls "relative autonomy" from the state or the ruling class. They are more effective controls than those of repression and force, because people willingly participate in their own subordination, thinking they are free as long as repression is not imposed.

Althusser's concept of ideology explains how the ruling class maintains power over the working class. The ruling class does so not only through the apparent state apparatuses like the police and the army, but through the veiled operations and practices of a set of institutions like school, church, and family. Indeed, the success of the ruling class depends upon individuals' acceptance of these various ideologies.

For Althusser, individuals are constructed as subjects through ideology. Ideology 'interpellates,' hails individuals; it singles them out, makes them feel recognized and independent of society. By this 'interpellation,' individuals accept that they have a place in the ideological order, and that they are participants in that particular order. Indeed, they collude in the creation of ideology and are determined by that ideology.

Althusser argued that literature allows us to 'see,' 'perceive,' and 'feel' social ideologies, which allude to reality. A great work of literature "achieves a 'retreat' (a fictional distance deriving from its formal composition) from the very ideology which feeds it. In this way a major literary work can transcend the ideology of the writer" (Raman Selden 89) and, through their formal properties, literary works "make us 'perceive' ... by an *internal distance*, the very

ideology in which they are held” (Terry Eagleton 271). This paper explores the applicability of Althusser’s theory to Manuel Puig’s Kiss of the Spider Woman (Vintage English Edition, 1991) and suggests how this theory may allow us to understand “power,” “interpellation,” and “reproduction” through the novel.

Kiss of the Spider Woman “(Spanish: *El beso de la mujer araña*) is a 1976 novel by Argentine writer Manuel Puig” (Wikipedia contributors “*Kiss of the spider Woman* (novel)”). This novel addresses at least three main themes of social suppression: “homosexuality as social practice, revolution as political activity, [and] film as culture” (Jonathan Tittler 47). By practicing homosexuality and politics, the main characters of the novel become a threat to their society, or “bad subjects who on occasion provoke the intervention of one of the detachments of the (repressive) state apparatus” (Althusser 181). The novel is about two men who share an Argentine prison cell: Molina, “a transgender woman” (Wikipedia contributors “*Kiss of the spider Woman* (novel)”), is a thirty-seven-year-old gay window dresser imprisoned for “corrupting minors” while Valentin is a twenty-six-year-old dogmatic Marxist activist taken in for his leftist political actions. In order to “pass time” and help them forget their reality of being prisoners, Molina recounts various films he has seen to Valentin. By the end of the novel, each succeeds in seducing the other into his way of seeing and doing things. Within this context, Althusser’s theory will be applied.

The issue of homosexuality is represented by Molina, the “middle-aged queen” as he refers to himself. He adopts the ideology of gender where the sexual relationship relies on a hierarchy of male and female; he asserts “his very identity as a transgendered woman desiring a heterosexual man rather than just being a deviant homosexual man” (Burke 7). Although he is physically male, he wants to be a woman because women are better (Puig 19) since they do not practice patriarchy. Nonetheless, when he thinks of himself as a woman, he

becomes prey to patriarchal ideology, which is embedded in the teachings of the dominant ideology through the ISAs. In other words, in the dominant ideology to be a woman means to be passive and submissive. Molina believes he has to submit to “my husband, he has to give the orders, so he will feel right. That’s the natural thing” (Puig 243-44). Thus, the dominant ideology is validated and reproduced by Molina’s accepting patriarchy as a necessity for a female.

Valentin, on the other hand, does not know anything about Molina’s type even though Valentin is at a university level, because the dominant ideology does not enable him to learn anything about homosexuality. Thus, the dominant ideology is validated and reproduced by Valentin’s ignorance of Molina’s “type of inclination” (Puig 59). In the cell, Molina expresses the reason for his behavior towards his partner: “I want to win your friendship, and ... your affection” (Puig 203). So he takes care of Valentin when the latter becomes ill. By doing so, they “reproduce a familial relationship—that of parent and child, mother and son—that has inscribed within it significant relations of power” (Lucille Kerr 202).

When Molina takes the role of a caring mother, the family ideology is validated and reproduced in the cell. On the powerful side of the mother-child relationship, Molina seduces Valentin and succeeds in reproducing the gender ideology when Valentin makes love to him: “Valentin ... If you like, you can do whatever you want with me ... because I want you to” (Puig 218). Valentin becomes convinced that sex is innocence itself. Once Molina realizes he is in love with Valentin he must revise his objective, for he had agreed to collude with the ruling class by bringing them information about Valentin and his comrades.

Molina’s relationship with Valentin develops gradually. Valentin admits at the end: “You, you’re the spider woman that traps men in her web” (Puig 260). Tittler argues, “Politically inert, socially outcast, lacking in self-respect, and untrained in the rigorous methods of

Marxian analysis, Molina ... confronts the challenges thrust upon him by the State and by his assertive [partner] Valentin” (49). He adopts the gender ideology and works hard to make it succeed in the small world that is populated by only two persons. Benner argues:

The restrictions of the small prison cell permits, or forces, a discourse between the two cell mates that eventually results in the friendship that would be impossible outside of the prison. (61)

Even though Molina succeeds in seducing Valentin inside the cell, his death at the end of the novel at the hands of those he is aiding confirms that death “is always out there, lurking beyond the prison bars as a threat against those who challenge the given social order” (Tittler 63). One may ask here, “How does Molina challenge the social order after agreeing to cooperate with the officials?” Indeed, Molina agrees to cooperate with them while being in the jail cell and before becoming emotionally attracted to Valentin. After his release, the situation changes for he becomes free and needs nothing from these state officials. Also, he has developed an intimate relationship with Valentin and this fact may require a change of his objectives. Furthermore, on the day of his leave, he accepts to convey some information to his lover’s comrades. Not to mention, he is still the same person who has been accused of “corrupting minors.” All these facts indicate that he is still a challenge to the social order. So, the police keep tracking him until he dies.

The second main theme in the novel is the political revolution, represented by young Valentin who believes in the revolutionary ideology. He points out that “social revolution, that’s what’s important” (Puig 27). His goal in adopting the leftist political ideology is to confront the ruling class’s exploitation and repression or, in Puig’s words, he fights “against the exploitation of [his] fellow man” (178). Such methods are considered a threat by the ruling class, so he is put in jail.

Valentin tries to escape the reality of his imprisonment when he

states, "Outside of this cell we may have oppressors, yes, but not inside" (Puig 202). Thus "our relationship isn't pressured by any one" (Puig 202). It is not true. He is in the cell because of the oppressors. And being in the cell is enough to curb his physical ability and limit his mental power. Indeed, there is nothing left but a body under the control of the ruling class. His letters are read before he gets them, and some letters are kept by his oppressors.

However, Valentin is educated in political science under the dominant ideology. What makes him a 'bad' citizen who confronts the mainstream ideology? Is it his training at the university? If so, ISAs, subsequently, may serve "different social ends.... Not all aspects of such apparatuses are ideological all the time" (Eagleton 148). Hence, "the Ideological State Apparatuses may be not only the *stake*, but also the *site* of class struggle, and often of bitter forms of class struggle" (Althusser 147).

Though Valentin struggles against exploitation, he exploits his mate Molina at the very first chance he gets. He asks his mate to take a message to his comrades when the ruling class allows Molina to leave the cell. By this exploitation the dominant ideology is validated and reproduced, because Valentin uses one of its principles, i.e. exploitation for the sake of his cause. Once Molina is eliminated, Valentin remains in the cell subjected to further torture. Accordingly, the dominant ideology reproduces a power relationship that allows the status quo to continue running smoothly.

The third theme in Kiss of the Spider Woman is the films recounted by Molina. As cultural ISAs, films are used by "bad citizens" to serve their purposes, i.e. to "pass the time" (Puig 15). And on a personal level, Molina uses films to create a common ground to communicate with his cell mate, because the scenes of the films relate to the two prisoners' daily lives and their growing friendship.

The recounted films encourage the articulate revolutionary to

analyze them, identify himself with the characters, and furthermore to tell something 'real' (Puig 130) about his girlfriend. Accordingly, cultural ISAs may serve class struggle, "for it is difficult to see that schools, churches, families and media are sheerly ideological structures, with no other purpose than to buttress the dominant power" (Eagleton 147). In spite of what has been said, ISAs mainly serve the dominant ideology, as Althusser assumes. The films recounted by Molina support patriarchy, the ruling power, and exploitation. Hence, the dominant ideology is validated and reproduced through retelling the films that buttress up the ruling class.

In addition, both prisoners' beliefs are rejected by their societies. Molina becomes conscious of his mother's position after his imprisonment: "the shame of having a son in prison. And the reason..." (Puig 36). On the other hand, Valentin's "mother is the kind of women who's very ... very difficult ... she's never liked my ideas" (Puig 121). Here the social repression colludes with the ideological repression and adds another dimension of pressure on these subjects. Thus, a power relation between these subjects and their society is reproduced, and the status quo is allowed to continue.

As long as these two characters are 'bad subjects,' the ruling power uses the repressive state apparatus to secure by force "the political conditions of the reproduction of relations of production which are in the last resort relations of exploitation" (Althusser 149-50). The ruling class uses the prison to suppress the 'bad citizens' into submission. The prison is a way to confiscate their physical and mental abilities. Accordingly, the dominant ideology is reproduced by limiting the ability and freedom of the 'bad' subjects. At the same time, the prison becomes an embodiment of ISA where the main social order prevails. When the two prisoners meet at the beginning, the dominant ideology is validated and reproduced by their ignorance of each other's "type of inclination" (Puig 59). Later, they try to overcome their situation by recounting films allowed by the ruling

power. Molina agrees to collude with the state officials as well. Furthermore, he accepts the role of 'woman' in his relationship with Valentin. All these acts help the dominant ideology be reproduced and/or validated.

Force is an important backup for the ruling class to achieve what it fails to achieve by ideology. Being in jail, Molina misses freedom and is ready to do whatever the ruling class wants in order to restore his freedom. They promise him his freedom if he spies on his partner in the cell. Hence, after force has been used, he becomes an agent for the ruling power. But due to the growth of the two prisoners' friendship, it is Molina who warns Valentin: "when you're involved in a struggle the way you are, you're not supposed to ... well, become attached ... to anyone" (Puig 201).

When the ruling power fails to get information from Molina about Valentin's group, they release Molina on parole, for they hope he can lead them to the place of activists. But he dies like a heroine in a movie before the ruling class can achieve their plan. When they realize that he may aid the activists instead, they kill him and accuse the activists: "the extremists prefer to eliminate Molina to avoid the possibility of a confession" (Puig 274).

However, both Molina's death and Valentin's obscure end raise some questions about the strength of their struggle as individuals against the ruling class. This growing struggle and the historical Argentine era of the text's composition place blame on the ruling power, which uses ideological repression to allow the status quo to continue.

Puig himself argues in an interview:

... the book is very much about the Argentina of 1973. There was ideological repression and social repression. I wanted to put those two things together. The rightist government was suspicious of any leftist ideology and the leftists were puritanical in the sexual area. The repression was expressed in different ways. What I mainly wanted to

talk about was the possibility of people changing. (Leonard Cheever 25)

In Kiss of the Spider Woman, both the leftist and gender ideologies—represented by the two prisoners—grow through understanding each other. Hence, the two men inside their jail cell become able to “see through each other’s perspective, and their eventual union, both sexual and emotional, represents this larger merging of viewpoints” (Chabot Davis 3). Instead of being ‘puritanical in the sexual area,’ the leftist ideology is ‘sexualized’ and vice versa. So, the novel demonstrates “the possibility of people changing” in spite of existing ideological repression.

In conclusion, Manuel Puig was able to let readers of Kiss of the Spider Woman ‘perceive’ through the main characters of the text the ideological repression and social suppression that prevailed in the Argentina of 1973. Although the dominant class put the characters in prison and paralyzed their movements and freedom, the prisoners confronted the ideological restraints and social conventions through the growth of their friendship and understanding of each other. The novel depicts the repression and resistance of 1973 Argentina and suggests that exploitative force used by one class or group against another is unacceptable, and attempts to change the status quo should be made and created by individuals.

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