

*Review*

## The influence of ideological state apparatuses in identity formation: Althusserian reading of Amiri Baraka's "In Memory of Radio"

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Accepted 15 October, 2013

The present research with the help of Louis Althusser's definition of "Ideology" and "Ideological State Apparatuses" (ISAs) attempts to study Amiri Baraka's well-known poem "In Memory of Radio". Althusser is important in modern literary theory and criticism because of his redefinition of the Marxist term ideology. According to him, ideology is "a representation of the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence". Althusser believes individuals are always-already subjects and subjects act in and by the system. According to Althusser, it is ideology which functions in material experiences and forms (through ISAs) which changes individuals to ideological subjects within capitalist societies. He adds there is no escape from ideology because we live in ideology, nothing happens outside ideology, and we cannot understand ourselves outside of ideology or we find our identities in front of the mirror of ideology. "In Memory of Radio" is a well-known poem by Amiri Baraka written in his Beat period which has been mentioned in many poetry anthologies. The present research scrutinizes the hidden meaning of "In Memory of Radio" by explaining the function of radio programs, comic series, and religious talks as ISAs. It tries to reveal the negative role of the dominant ideology and radio programs as ISAs in identity formation of individuals in society, African American identities are hailed by White ideology.

**Key words:** Amiri Baraka, Ideology, ISA, RSA, Louis Althusser.

### INTRODUCTION: LOUIS ALTHUSSER AND THE DEFINITION OF IDEOLOGY

Louis Pierre Althusser (16 October 1918 – 22 October 1990) was a French Marxist philosopher, writer, and theorist who was born in Algeria and he studied in École Normale Supérieure in Paris where he became a professor of philosophy. Louis Althusser is very important in modern literary theory and criticism as Ferretter (2006) claims it is not possible to interpret literature and culture in the society based on capitalist values without thinkers like Althusser. Although Althusser had criticized many features of French Structuralism, many scholars regarded him as a leading structuralist Marxist in the 1960s (Ferretter, 2006). Althusser was a member of French

Communist Party for a long period of time. He was defender of Marxist's traditions—he was against the threats that were attacking Marxism. In other words, Althusser believed that Marx's theories have been mis-understood. As a Marxist, Althusser considered people's actions, choices, values, desires, judgments, and preferences as products of social experiences.

Althusser's fame is due to his explanation of the Marxist term "ideology" in his best known essay "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses" published in 1968. He claims that ideology is unchanging and present throughout history; "ideology has no history" (Althusser, 2003).

In order to explain the structure and function of ideology, Althusser defines ideology as “a representation of the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence” (Althusser, 2003). In other words, individuals make an “illusion” in their relationship to reality or “ideology distorts our view of our true ‘conditions of existence’” (Bertens, 2001). Althusser mentions two major reasons for making this illusion or imaginary relationship to reality. First, small group of people (Althusser refers to Christian priests) desire to dominate or control the majority of people through the “false representation of the world which they have imagined to enslave other minds by dominating their imaginations” (Althusser, 2003). The second reason is “the alienation in the imaginary of the representation of men’s conditions of existence” (Althusser, 2003). Thus, Althusser thinks of ideology as the main instrument of domination. He writes:

*Men live their actions, usually referred to as freedom and ‘consciousness’ by the classical tradition, in ideology, by and through ideology; in short, the ‘lived’ relation between men and the world, including History (in political action or inaction), passes through ideology, or better, is ideology itself” (Ferretter, 2006).*

To put it simply, one can state for Althusser ideology is a cluster of beliefs that work in our minds as common sense and let the existing conditions reproduce themselves; moreover, these beliefs are set and supported by the ruling class.

Furthermore, Althusser describes the second feature of ideology which is the “material existence” of ideology. Althusser claims that all the ideas or representations which shape the ideology do not have a spiritual or ideal existence:

*I shall therefore say that, where only a single subject (such and such individual) is concerned, the existence of the ideas of his belief is material in that his ideas are his material actions inserted into his material practices governed by material rituals which are themselves defined by the material ideological apparatus from which we derive the ideas of that subject ... Ideas have disappeared as such (insofar as they are endowed with an ideal or spiritual existence), to the precise extent that it has emerged that their existence is inscribed in the actions of practices governed by rituals defined in the last instance by an ideological apparatus. It therefore appears that the subject acts insofar as he is acted by the following system (set out in the order of its real determination): ideology existing in a material ideological apparatus, describing material practices governed by a material ritual, which practices exist in the material actions of a subject acting in all consciousness according to his belief (Althusser, 2003).*

He declares that “an ideology exists in an apparatus, and

its practice, or practices”, and gives an example of a Christian believer in God (believing in God as an ideology) who goes to the church, kneels, prays, confesses, repents, and so on, which are the material existence of the mentioned religious or ethical ideology (Althusser, 2003). He adds this example which reminds Pascal’s defensive dialectic assertion: “Kneel down, move your lips in prayer, and you will believe” (Althusser, 2003). Then, he puts these claims about the ideology of an individual in a Marxist language: “his ideas are his material actions inserted into material practices governed by material rituals which are themselves defined by the material ideological apparatus from which derive the ideas of that subject” (Althusser, 2003). Therefore, the ideas of individuals exist in the actions they perform.

Althusser, then, proposes his next theory about “subject”: 1) “there is no practice except by and in an ideology;” 2) “there is no ideology except by the subject and for subjects” (Althusser, 2003). Althusser regards subjectivity as a form of ideology. He names this one as his last proposition, which means “there is no ideology except for concrete subject” (Althusser, 2003). According to Althusser, it is ideology (functioning in material experiences and forms) which converts individuals to ideological subjects within capitalist societies. He concludes there is no escape from ideology because we live in ideology and nothing happens outside ideology (Althusser, 2003). We cannot understand ourselves outside of ideology, or according to Althusser, we find our identities in front of the mirror of ideology (Althusser, 2003).

Althusser also suggests an important formulation for developing his theories which he has borrowed it from Lacan’s term “mirror stage”. He asserts that “ideology hails or interpellates concrete individuals as concrete subjects” (Althusser, 2003). In other words, ideology controls over the individuals, and through the careful action of “interpellation” or hailing transforms them into subjects. He gives the example of hailing suspects by a police who calls: “Hey, you there!” and that hailed individual (guilty or irreproachable) turns round (Althusser, 2003). Now, that supposed individual by a physical action (turning round) is transformed into a subject. Althusser explains that the action of interpellation, like the mentioned example, happens in reality without any pause. In other words, ideology and interpellation exist as the same thing, and “ideology has always-already interpellated individuals as subjects” or “an individual is always-already subject, even before he is born” (Althusser, 2003).

Althusser also introduces two terms which are the ways or methods by which the dominant keeps its own control. These two terms are “Repressive State Apparatus” (RSA) and “Ideological State Apparatus” (ISA). Repressive State Apparatuses are the means of force in society like,

<sup>1</sup> Jacques Marie Émile Lacan (13 April 1901 – 9 September 1981) was a French psychoanalyst and psychiatrist who had a great influence of philosophy.

court, heads of state, police, army, and so on by which the dominant keeps its force and control directly. According to Althusser, the fundamental use of RSA is to perform violently in favor of the dominant class in the society (Leitch, 2001). The second group of tools of control is ideological and indirect. Ideological experience includes of a group of establishments called "Ideological State Apparatuses" which are the family, the media, religious organizations, and most importantly the educational system. According to Althusser, ideology functions through ideological State Apparatuses (Bertens, 2001). Althusser declares "the vast majority of subjects work all right 'all by themselves,' that is by ideology whose concrete forms are realized in the Ideo-logical State Apparatuses (Althusser, 2003). Althusser points to the differences among RSA and ISA as follows: 1) In contrast to ISA which is plural and diverse, RSA acts a unified whole. However, ruling ideology unites scattered ISAs ultimately. 2) RSA acts considerably by means of repression and violence and secondarily by ideology, but ISA acts noticeably by ideology and secondarily by repression and violence. ISA acts in a hidden and a symbolic way (Leitch, 2001).

The present research with the help of Althusser's concepts of ideology and ISA tries to study the poem "In Memory of Radio" by Amiri Baraka<sup>2</sup>. It attempts to explore the destructive influence of radio as an entertainment industry on the simple mind of the poem's speaker as a child and answer the following questions:

1. What is the definition of ideology and ISA, and how they work within society?
2. How does ideology keep individuals in state of ignorance and submission?
3. How does Baraka's poem represent the hidden structure of ISAs in American society?

### **Ideological state apparatuses and identity formation in Baraka's "In Memory of Radio"**

"In Memory of Radio" is one of the most important poems of Baraka which has been mentioned in many poetry Anthologies. In this poem we read:

Who has ever stopped to think of the divinity of Lamont Cranston?

(Only Jack Kerouac, that I know of: & me.

The rest of you probably had on WCBS and Kate Smith,  
Or something equally unattractive.)

What can I say?

<sup>2</sup> Imamu Amiri Baraka (born October 7, 1934), formerly known as LeRoi Jones, is a well-known African American poet, playwright, essay writer, music critic, actor, movie director, and political activist. He is best known as the leader of Black Arts movement (1965-1976).

It is better to have loved and lost  
Than to put linoleum in your living rooms?

Am I a sage or something?

Mandrake's hypnotic gesture of the week?

(Remember, I do not have the healing powers of Oral Roberts...

I cannot, like F. J. Sheen, tell you how to get saved & rich!

I cannot even order you to the gaschamber satori like Hitler or Goddy Knight)

& love is an evil word.

Turn it backwards/see, see what I mean?

An evil word. & besides

who understands it?

I certainly wouldn't like to go out on that kind of limb.

Saturday mornings we listened to the Red Lantern & his undersea folk.

At 11, Let's Pretend

& we did

& I, the poet, still do. Thank God!

What was it he used to say (after the transformation when he was safe

& invisible & the unbelievers couldn't throw stones?)

"Heh, heh, heh.

Who knows what evil lurks in the hearts of men? The Shadow knows."

O, yes he does

O, yes he does

An evil word it is,

This Love.

In this poem, "In Memory of Radio", radio programs, hosts, and the poet's memories are pieces of different materials or elements which make the analysis of the dominant ideology and ISAs in this poem possible. First, the title of the poem, "In Memory of Radio", seems to point to an elegy to the radio and all the pop-culture idols that came from the industry of radio entertainment. Throughout the poem, Baraka refers to some radio stars and radio favorites including Lamont Cranston and "The Shadow", F.J. Sheen, Oral Roberts, Kate Smith, and "The Red Lantern". As he names these famous people and entertaining programs, he explains their most well-known characteristics especially the ones that left a powerful influence on him as well as the rest of radio's auditors. He makes some comparisons to the subject (whether it be F.J. Sheen or Hitler) in which he connects the reader to the impact they each had over the radio auditors and the role they played in forming American pop-culture during the days of radio to the effect he has over the reader.

Baraka praises the radio because it was as the main

device of entertainment and information during the time period when television was not an option for the majority of American people. He explains the function of radio, in a way, as a tool of entertainment and information sharing why the radio was so loved by Amiri Baraka. The poet separates himself from other auditors by saying "WCBS and Kate Smith" as something "unattractive" and points to the programs Baraka loved to listen to such as the "The Shadow" and "Let's Pretend". Baraka refers to some radio programs and icons that made American people amused for a decade or two. The first pointed icon is from a 1930s radio program show, *The Shadow*, in which a psychic vigilante lived under the different name "Lamont Cranston" when not in action. In the first line of the poem Baraka questions the reader "who has ever stopped to think of the divinity of Lamont Cranston?", telling the favoritism the poet held to *The Shadow* against listening to WCBS or Kate Smith, which Baraka criticizes strongly in a manner, comparing the two to "something equally unattractive" (in line four). WCBS was the most important studio for CBS and included numerous musical and comedic talents, one of them being Kate Smith, who was well-known for immortalizing "God Bless America".

Many references in the poem make a cynical, over-critical behavior for Amiri Baraka. For instance, in line five he points to myths in American culture: "What can I say? It is better to have loved and lost than to put linoleum in your living rooms?" It is clear that Baraka does not agree with these assertions, but he knows he is profoundly powerless in confrontation with these popular American beliefs. Another group of references are represented in the third stanza with "Mandrake's hypnotic gesture of the week", pointing to *Mandrake the Magician*, a 1930's comic strip-turned-radio series of a crime fighting magician. After that Baraka compares himself to the radio icons like F.J. Sheen and Oral Roberts, asserting he cannot say how to get saved and prosperous nor does he have curing abilities. F.J. Sheen and Oral Roberts are famous televangelists (Sheen being Catholic and Roberts being Pentecostal<sup>3</sup>) both of them were very charismatic in getting their auditors to go deep into their souls, as well as their pockets! Next Baraka points to his powerlessness to sentence a person to death or punishment like Adolph Hitler or Goodwin "Goddy" Knight, who was the governor of California at the time of the poem's publication, and he was partly responsible for keeping Caryl Chessman on death row for more than a decade. After "In Memory of Radio" publication in 1959, a universal turmoil was ignited over the brutality of Knight's behavior. Baraka utilized the metaphor of Goddy Knight to declare the message that true humanity does not exist in the world and injustice will always be present.

As the poem continues it becomes more critical of

<sup>3</sup> Pentecostal is a famous movement within Christianity which places special emphasis on a direct personal experience of God through the baptism with the Holy Spirit.

American society. It points to the dominant ideology and the evil behind these ideologies in this world, even in simple radio programs that he remembers from his childhood and youth. For instance, he refers to the simple word love. The notion of love is hard to realize, even in line sixteen Baraka admits that. According to Baraka, love is an evil word. He claims love has got double nature, it can be love or, as he says, "evol". Baraka uses the word "evol", which is a slang-term meaning "humorously evil" to explain love. As a grown up, the poet says he loved to listen to *The Red Lantern*, a DC comic strip circa in 1940, and *Let's Pretend*, a long running CBS program made and directed by Nila Mack, on the radio. But as he became older he was not relaxed with the understanding of his loss of innocence, and not being able to believe what was on the surface.

The most important message of "In Memory of Radio" is where Baraka cunningly shows his struggle of growing up as a Black American child with a white mentality. He bitterly points to the confusion he experienced with that understanding of the radio as a tool against African Americans in the United States during the first decades of the twentieth century. He subtly reveals the hidden dominant ideology behind the radio programs as a means of entertainment industry. Baraka continues to explain listening to the radio program: "At 11, Let's Pretend / & we did / & I, the poet, still do. Thank God!" These words carry the idea that the poet still pretends that the evil in men's hearts is not really there. He wants to pretend that it was all a mistake or misunderstanding. Borrowing the narrative theories of Genette, the poem's speaker or the narrator of the story is Baraka as a mature man, but the focalizer is Baraka as a child or teenager who used to listen to radio programs. As he grows older he realizes the hidden structure of power and the action and the purpose of the dominant ideology. He finally understands over the surface of the radio an entertainment and criticizes it bitterly.

Baraka declares the divine Shadow, "Who knows what evil lurks in the hearts of men? The Shadow knows" to connect the idea of evil existing in reality, but the true intention of the dominant ideology is covered by brilliant surface in the form of religious talk programs, clever and adventurous comic shows, and patriotic broadcasts to an entire nation. The purpose of this evil ideology is to justify the mass murder of over sixty million innocent African slaves during three hundred years in the history of slavery in the U.S. It seems like the job of the dominant white ideology behind the radio programs, the title of Baraka's poem, "In Memory of Radio", conceals the poet's intentions. But what is in Baraka's mind is that all these interesting things are only beautiful facades for bigger motives. Therefore, this poem is not only an elegy or an ode to the radio. It is a piece of art critical of the white society of the United States.

It seems Baraka's "In Memory of Radio" is the best representation of Althusser's assertion: "... a small

number of cynical men who base their domination and exploitation of the people on a falsified representation of the world which they have imagined in order to enslave other minds by dominating their imaginations." Radio programs are portrayed as the sounds of the Evil. Baraka represents how ideology makes individuals subjects of the dominant social order or how ideology creates obedient subjects who practice dominant values of civil institutions. According to Althusser, these Ideological State Apparatuses—religious talks, comic series and radio shows—operate through implicit consent realized in accepted practices. "Social norms are ideologically slanted in favor of a particular class or group of classes but are accepted as natural by other classes" (Fiske, 2003). The speaker of the poem refers to his childhood as the representative of everyman who is subordinated and oppressed by a dominant class or ideology unknowingly.

Regarding the terms of ideology and ISA by Althusser, there is no subject outside ideology and ideology is made possible by the subject and its material practices defined by ISA. In "In Memory of Radio" different ISAs (mentioned radio icons and programs) can be considered that hail the poet (or the poem's speaker) as an individual and make him subject including social structure, culture, and entertainment industry structure. The poet as a child or a teenager and other radio listeners were hailed constantly. The poet points at the sight of danger of media ISAs which are seen in action.

Amiri Baraka's "In Memory of Radio" can be read as the reworking and the reproduction of the ideological process. The poem's speaker, indeed, illuminates the way in which ideology generates and circulates meaning in society which is linked to a social structure of the United States dominated by white people. This social structure itself is "held in place" and preserved by "the very meanings that [ideology] produces" (Fiske, 2003). In other words, it illustrates how ideology should appear as "natural" and "spontaneous" so that the "reproduction of the relations of production" can be guaranteed (Althusser, 2003). Therefore, the poet hints to this point that he as a child enjoyed the radio programs without knowing the evil intentions behind them—the radio programs preached the intended ideology of the White dominant class.

This functioning of ideology, however, must not be taken as "a static set of ideas." Rather it is "a dynamic process constantly reproduced and reconstituted in practice—that is, in the ways that people think, act, and understand themselves and their relationship to society" (Fiske, 2003). The constant reproduction and reconstitution of ideology explains how the radio programs (the ISAs) through the course of the poem's narration produce and define new meanings and then lose their values. Whereas the radio programs, comic series and religious talks in the beginning are viewed to be the interesting and funny entertainments and the object of desire for the

poem's speaker as a child, but they are later on devalued.

The dynamic reproduction of ideology or, better say, "the struggle for meaning" takes place so that "the sites of power" are maintained because the subordinate's "material social experience constantly reminds them of the disadvantages" they bear and thus they "pose constant threat to the dominant" (Fiske, 2003). Therefore it can be argued that the change of the radio programs' meaning (ascription of evil to them) in the poem is due to the fact that they become a threat to the social status of African Americans and to establish the position of the dominant white ideology. Thus, this appears quite obvious and commonsensical that subjects should remain in their true positions (stations, posts) so that the social structure (the Universe) is preserved.

Ideology, according to Althusser, is inescapable, that is "individuals are always-already subjects" (Althusser, 2003). Similarly, Baraka as a child was "always-already a subject" despite his ignorance. The poem's speaker as a subject "acts as he is acted by the system" (Althusser 698). Baraka affirms that he could not go outside of ideology because he was not able to as "ideology has no outside" (Althusser, 2003). It is better to say he was constantly "interpellated" or "hailed" as a "concrete subject" by ideology hidden in radio programs (ISAs). Therefore, Baraka as an unaware child "freely accepts his submission" and subjection to such material practices inscribed by ISAs in the illusion that he freely is making those choices "all by himself" (Althusser, 2003). Thus in response to the interpellation of ideological apparatuses (the radio programs) he follows them (to live and think like white people) in ignorance and without any resistance.

As mentioned before, Althusser, finally, contends that ideology is "the representation of the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence" (Althusser, 2003). This is to say, ideology is a distortion of reality. The illusiveness of reality is implied in the description of radio programs used to describe American society during the first decades of the twentieth century. In this way, the opposition of real/illusory is undermined as the real appears to be unreal and the illusory is taken to be real. Therefore, once again it can be said that "there is no outside ideology."

## Conclusion

Althusser's definition of Ideology and ISAs gives us a new vision to study the hidden structure of power relations, ideology and the function of ISAs within the literary works. Baraka's "In Memory of Radio" aims to induce the ideology of the possibilities of questioning and undermining the social system. It reveals the hidden function of the dominant White ideology through radio

programs as ISAs in shaping identities of African Americans. The poem aims to say Black American identities are interpellated or hailed by the dominant ideology through radio programs (ISAs). It criticizes the dangerous and disastrous influences of Radio programs on the mind of African American children, the radio icons and shown affected the mind of Black Americans to imitate the lifestyle of White people.

According to Macherey and Balibar (1978), "Literature is produced finally through the effect of one or more ideological contradictions precisely because these contradictions cannot be solved within the ideology". The ideological contradictions raised in "In Memory of Radio" draws on the situation in which an innocent and unaware child faces a cruel system. Amiri Baraka produces ideological contradictions and imaginary solutions—"a presentation as solution". Therefore, it seems the purpose of the production of "In Memory of Radio" is the representation of Baraka's dissatisfaction of the function of dominant ideology behind the radio programs as ISAs and their negative influence on African American children and youths during the first decades of the twentieth century.

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