

Unconscious Resistance Against Althusserian Ideology in Tobias Wolff's Short Story *Bullet in the Brain* in the Light of Raymond Williams and Terry Eagleton

Farid Parvaneh^{1,*}; Ali Sohrabi²

¹Islamic Azad University, Qom Branch, Qom, Iran

²Student of English Language & Literature, Islamic Azad University, Tehran Central Branch, Tehran, Iran

Email: Ali_s_1364@yahoo.com

*Corresponding author.

Assistant professor.

Address: Islamic Azad University, Qom Branch, Qom, Iran

Email: Faridparvaneh@gmail.com

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Abstract

This paper discusses individual's determinism caused by ideology; in fact, it is an attempt to show how people in a society are under the influence of the ideology and how these different forms of ideology change people's view toward life and thus change their whole lives. Being doomed to live and think in a way that ideology requires a subject, or being trapped and therefore living in a world like that of stories are other notions which are talked over in this paper. Deterministic or non-deterministic panorama toward the ideological world of the characters in "Bullet in the Brain" a short story by Tobias Wolff is the work under analysis by the researchers.

As the first step, the researchers have identified the ideologies governing the given story. The second step to take was to find traces of resistance toward those power(s) subjected to individuals by the dominant ideology in the society portrayed by the writer of the story. The core fact that makes such a research a novel one is the fact that the form of resistance studied in this story is not a conscious one; although getting its roots from the conscious world of ideas, the whole process of movement against the ideology takes place unintentionally after a drastic change in existence of the protagonist of the short story.

Key words: Ideology; Althusserian or ideological individual; Subject; Hegemony; Resistance; Natural and normal

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INTRODUCTION

Tobias Wolff's short story "Bullet in the Brain" was published in *New Yorker* (1995) and then appeared in the short story collection *The Night in Question* (1996). Tobias Wolff was born on June 19, 1945 Alabama. Wolff's fiction in the words of James Hannah has the use of "entering the story in medias res, in the middle of things." Hannah declares that Wolff's style consists of repeated punctures of brilliance. He believes that these brilliant moments, however, frequently lead to conclusions that lack resolution. But such a notion may not be true for "Bullet in the Brain", for the story opens a new window towards a great state of mind which in a way seems to be unique in the realm of short story.

Once during the Vietnam War Wolff and his and his assistant, Sergeant Benet decided to go on a trip in order to procure a television set. They agreed to watch Thanksgiving Day episode of *Bonanza* on a large color TV. Over the whole trip in which they were adjuncts to a base composed entirely of South Vietnamese soldiers, American friends never accustomed themselves of any forms of acculturation:

They have resolved to "live like Americans," and have spent much of their time bartering for goods. They have acquired a sizable stash of things. They compile "electric lights, a TV, a stereo, a stove, a refrigerator, and a generator to keep it all running." In this process, Wolff surrounds himself with as many American consumer goods as possible. Alienated, lonely, and bored—a frightened soldier performing a doomed task in a doomed war—Wolff cannot strip himself of the things to which he has become accustomed. His response to immersion in a foreign culture is to refuse the immersion. He builds a barrier of

possessions between himself and the larger Vietnamese society. "Given the chance," he writes, "I'd have lived smack in the middle of a minefield twenty miles wide" (Parini 332).

Wolff feels besieged. He is the known and familiar character seen in his own stories; a lonely man far from the society in which he lives whose own ideas and circumstances have separated him from the whole world. The other point which is seen in his stories is mentioned by himself. Wolff himself says in his contribution to *Passion and Craft: Conversations with Notable Writers*: "Many of the characters are somewhat self-deceived, as most of us are in one way or another." He believes that people deceive themselves and this is what can be felt by reading his works. Parini climes: "The primary difference with Wolff, however, is that the progression is often external rather than internal; the subconscious is his staked-out territory. A work that takes this area—the human mind—and applies this extension technique is "Bullet in the Brain"(342).

Parini in *American Writers* says that:

Wolff plays with the notions of plot and cliché—the criminals behave exactly like Hollywood sketches of bank robbers, wearing ski masks and speaking in thick, thug-like accents. Anders cannot help but notice this instance of life imitating bad art. He is so occupied by the idea of this irony that he cannot control himself; he becomes, quite unintentionally, engaged in a verbal sparring match with one of the thieves. This power struggle leads to his death; the criminal—who does not understand Anders' ironic laughter or his smirking references to John Woo's movie *The Killers*—shoots him in the head. (Parini 342)

In 2001, Wolff's enthusiastically praised short story "Bullet in the Brain" was adapted into a short film by David Von Ancken and CJ Follini starring Tom Noonan and Dean Winters.

"Bullet in the Brain" has two distinctive parts; one before the shooting and one after that. The writer masterfully opens a new hole (symbolically bullet's hole) toward the protagonist's dying views and memories. In the first half on the story elements of ideology according to Althusser's point of view are talked over and in the second part the elements of unconscious resistance mainly on the words of Williams and Eagleton are going to be conversed.

1. ARGUMENT

The quest for understanding determinism and free will in human life for many years have forced scholars and researchers to investigate roots of human essence, its nature or societal factors in order to find whether an individual is a product of its society or a free entity. After Marxism, a materialistic movement, which considers an individual as an alienated subject in a capitalist society, there was no longer any trace for finding a way to free will in human life; what was focused on then was fighting

back and revolting capitalism which was -in their point of view- exploiting them. After years of failed revolutions the only way left was not a direct battle but a form of resistance in which either the ideologies of the two classes -ruler and ruled- clashed or force met force and in this regards two correct ideologies congregated against one another.

Althusserian point of view toward human being, in which the subject or what we call human will and action is nothing but a societal function, works in a way that the dominant power of the society determines; directly or indirectly. In this regards all people's endeavors and sufferings as painters and authors of their destiny changes into just a controlled and monitored movement which ideological structures of the community are the actual directors. Deterministically individuals are puppets in the drama of social life.

Althusser believes that ideology never acts fiercely and directly but through something which its function may not be easily visible. Here he mentions Ideological State Apparatuses (ISAs). He emphasizes that ISAs come in the form of "distinct and specialized institutions"(144) and classifies them as follows:

-- the religious ISA (the system of the different Churches), -- the educational ISA (the system of the different public and private 'Schools'), -- the family ISA,-- the legal ISA,-- the political ISA (the political system, including the different Parties),-- the communications ISA (press, radio and television, etc.), -- the cultural ISA (Literature, the Arts, sports, etc.). (Althusser L&P 143-144)

Althusser declares that all Ideological State Apparatuses lead into a similar result: "capitalist relation of exploitation"(155). School for many years prepares the children with different methods to teach them a certain amount of "know-how" of the ruling ideology and after some years sends them out for production and they are divided into portions from workers of small peasants to managers, i.e. from the most exploited to the agents of exploitation. (156)

Each mass ejected *en route* is practically provided with the ideology which suits the role it has to fulfill in class society: the role of the exploited (with a 'highly-developed' 'professional', 'ethical', 'civic', 'national' and a-political consciousness); the role of the agent of exploitation (ability to give the workers orders and speak to them: 'human relations'), of the agent of repression (ability to give orders and enforce obedience 'without discussion', or ability to manipulate the demagoguery of a political leader's rhetoric), or of the professional ideologist (ability to treat consciousnesses with the respect, i.e. with the contempt, blackmail, and demagoguery they deserve, adapted to the accents of Morality, of Virtue, of 'Transcendence', of the Nation, of France's World Role, etc.). (Althusser 156-157)

The interesting part here is that he simply shows that there is no way out of ideology and as a result he indirectly illustrates the determinism presented by ideology or ideological determinism.

Indeed, if he does not do what he ought to do as a function of

what he believes, it is because he does something else, which, still as a function of the same idealist scheme, implies that he has other ideas in his head as well as those he proclaims, and that he acts according to these other ideas, as a man who is either "inconsistent" ("no one is willingly evil") or cynical, or perverse. (Althusser 169)

In fact the resistance itself is ideological. "...the 'ideas' of a human subject exist in his actions, or ought to exist in his actions, and if that is not the case, it lends him other ideas corresponding to the actions (however perverse) that he does perform." (169)

When Althusser talks about ideology he always has a word about subject. He affirms that there is no ideology possible unless for a subject or whatever functions as subject. He points on the following notes himself to show how important the subject is: "(1) there is no practice except by and in an ideology; (2) There is no ideology except by the subject and for subjects" (170).

It is really spellbinding that people may think that they do something so ordinarily and naturally; so how can such a usual thing or activity be ideological? For example someone thinks that it is so natural that s/he marries, has children or for example gets up in the morning and goes to work or sends his or her kids to school when they are six or seven. He announces that these are even more ideological than what we think as pure ideology like religion or culture. He claims that Ideology is natural and obvious; the "obviousness" that you and I are subjects "is an ideological effect, the elementary ideological effect" (173).

He even goes further and strikes his final theory. Just when a person is born, before a person is born, before one is conceived, s/he is regarded as a subject:

You and I are *always already* subjects, and as such constantly practice the rituals of ideological recognition, which guarantee for us that we are indeed concrete, individual, distinguishable and (naturally) irreplaceable subjects. The writing I am currently executing and the reading you are currently performing are also in this respect rituals of ideological recognition, including the 'obviousness' with which the 'truth' or 'error' of my reflections may impose itself on you. (Althusser 172-173)

On the contrary there always have been counterarguments toward the above mentioned perspective to human will and intentions. Many philosophers believe that it is not that simple to generalize all sorts of human behaviors as something destined or doomed, for many actions or even reactions to what is imposed on human beings are not necessarily defined by the rules or what we may call common sense. Besides, there is resistance to even fixed and never-able-to-be-resisted ideas which show that determinism cannot be the whole story and the ultimate point of human life. For example many people and experts believe that in order for a government to be successful, it is important to make people ignorant of what is happening to them. In other words, keep your people busy to something and do whatever you want to

do, though unlawful. What is an outcome in this way? Actually one consequence would be what mentioned in the first paragraph, society will follow what the men in power had decided. But the second reaction to this policy is spontaneous awareness of a group of people -mostly intellectuals- who not only do resist and criticize the policies but also they try to go against the mainstream of ideological values that the society presents.

In Raymond Williams's view, the way of regarding people as doomed creatures, just ignores the resistant powers, the ideas and concepts which actually do not confirm and are willing to break the dominant ideology. Though he believes that these opposing forces are not simply against the grain but there is a complicated web-like form is just present. Luke Fretter in Althusser claims that Williams repeats "hegemonic" and "counter-hegemonic" principles discussed by Gramsci as resisting forms (139). Williams writes: "The reality of any hegemony, in the extended political and cultural sense, is that, while by definition it is always dominant, it is never either total or exclusive. At any time, forms of alternative or directly oppositional politics and culture exist as significant elements in the society" (M&L 113).

Fretter utters that Williams shows that hegemony allows us to distinguish the complex reality between hegemonic and counter-hegemonic relationships of a specific social process through historical, social or cultural analysis. Hegemonic structures of a culture in contrast to the dominant ideology are the discourses in which there are traces of resistance to all the given dominant ideologies; they form an alternative to those ideologies. On the other hand counter-hegemonic discourses are determined in forms of a frame that all those given hegemonic practices resist them. Williams writes:

Any hegemonic process must be especially alert and responsive to the alternatives and opposition which question or threaten its dominance. The reality of cultural process must then always include the efforts and contributions of those who are in one way or another outside or at the edge of the terms of the specific hegemony. (Williams 113)

Williams maintains: "Practical consciousness is almost always different from official consciousness" (Williams 130). A given social group or generation lives differently to the ways in which the culture as a whole says that it is living. He continues:

Yet the actual alternative to the received and produced fixed forms is not silence: not the absence, the unconscious, which bourgeois culture has mythicized. It is a kind of feeling and thinking which is indeed social and material, but each in an embryonic phase before it can become fully articulate and defined exchange. (Williams 131)

And somewhere else he argues: "There is always, in varying degrees, practical consciousness, in specific relationships, specific skills, specific perceptions, that is unquestionably social and that a specifically dominant social order neglects, excludes, represses or simply fails

to recognize" (125).

A book critic, Anders known for his harsh criticisms goes to a bank in late hours and the teller puts the "position closed" sign in front of her stall. Women in front of Anders start nagging and look at him for his accord but he digresses and looks at a crying boy and makes some violent points about the child. Meanwhile robbers enter the bank, he relates this to justice. One of the robbers gets near Anders to hush him. But he does not care. The man gets angry and puts a bullet in Anders's head. And the story finishes as he is remembering and not remembering some things about his past life while the bullet is passing his head.

2. IDEOLOGICAL ANDERS

The plot of the story seems so simple but deep inside there are many notions I wish to talk about. Starting from Althusser and ideology as a movie critic he is an ideological creature for he follows some exact and fixed rules and criticizes or reviews a book based on some definite standards (as every critic does). Then it is not much unreal to deal with his character as a person who follows some routines and ideologies in his life. His pessimism can be a good indication of his structured mind: "Anders - a book critic known for the weary, elegant savagery with which he dispatched almost everything he reviewed." (1) As Eagleton believes since all people are living with their judgments about others they are ideological:

Most people would not concede that without preconceptions of some kind we would not even be able to identify an issue or situation, let alone pass judgement upon it. There is no such thing as presuppositionless thought, and to this extent all of our thinking might be said to be ideological. (Eagleton 3, 4)

He seems to be proud because he does not want to come to an agreement with the women in the bank although he is angry at the teller for closing her position. But harshly he talks about the crying child somewhere in the bank then utters his anger at the teller in an extreme way: "Unforgivable, Heaven will take note." (1) As it is obvious he is still passing judgment, though this time more ideologically by referencing religion and Bible.

3. RESISTANCE STARTS

For a reason or another in this part of the story for no special reason Anders goes out of the circle of the people in the bank. It is the natural (ideological) things that a person fears the danger of robbers but Anders just continues his words and does not get silent. In a way his not shutting up can be justified with the matter that he may believe that the robbers are the agents of God to execute justice. The great point is when the robber gets near to him and says "Keep your big mouth shut!" the resistance starts when the man says "dead meat" in his threats.

Anders says: "Dead meat." He turned to the woman in front of him. "Great script, eh? The stern, brass-knuckled poetry of the dangerous classes."

He still is passing judgment (still ideological creature). The story goes on to the part when the robber wants to get money from the already-closed position when Anders makes a comment. Here he has started his movement against the current situation unconsciously:

"There you go," Anders said to the woman in front of him.

"Justice is done."

"Hey! Bright boy! Did I tell you talk?"

"No," Anders said.

"Then shut your trap."

"Did you hear that?" Anders said. "'Bright boy.' Right out of 'The Killers'."

Regardless of the situation Anders picks on the words and phrase the robber is uttering and this makes him start laughing. He looks to the eyes of the robber, the robber says don't stare at me. He looks down; the robber puts his pistol under his chin to look up. It is not the obedience that irritates the robber, interestingly it is not even the disobedience making him angry but he goes crazy because Anders is actually not paying any attention. Anders while looking up on the ceiling, catches sight of the paintings (Althusser believes that art is something outside ideology). Even here he wonders why he hasn't been paying attention to these paintings all these years which may ironically mean that being drowned in the sea of ideology hasn't permitted him to look at this work of art. Actually he does not like the painting which this makes him laugh again.

The robber angrily asks: "What's so funny, bright boy?"

"Nothing."

"You think I'm comical? You think I'm some kind of clown?"

Ideologies give plausible and logical interpretation to people's behavior or reactions. That's what Eagleton talks about and exactly causes the robbers anger:

Ideologies can be seen as more or less systematic attempts to provide plausible explanations and justifications for social behaviour which might otherwise be the object of criticism. These apologies then conceal the truth from others, and perhaps also from the rationalizing subject itself . . . all theoretical ideology becomes a kind of elaborate rationalization, substituting supposedly rational belief for irrational or arational emotions and opinions. (Eagleton 52)

Laughing is a sign of making fun of someone for the robber. Anders laughs and it makes the man angrier. The interesting point is that while everybody is speechless (ideological, normal reaction) not only does he talk but he also laughs. It seems that he does not understand the situation. The thing is he does not want to make the robber angry or even to show himself brave which both are ideological outcomes, but he actually is not in the picture and this makes his reactions sort of resistance. Because of this thing the robber gets furious. Nothing is intended behind Anders's reactions and this makes the

robber go mad. The robber gets hotter and hotter when his threats are useless as if he's talking to a Japanese person knowing nothing of English. And actually everybody knows that pistol and force does not require you to know any language but Anders does not feel the threat and danger. Looking as if he is completely outside even universal ideologies, Anders acts like an animal or dead person. Actually this is what Althusser may anticipate as resistance when he says: "So ideology is the matter of lived relation between men and their world." (Althusser 2 33)

As the story goes on the robber uses his ultimate force and says: "Fuck with me again, you're history. *Capiche?*" But the threat is not going to work because Anders is acting unconsciously like a drunkard:

Anders burst out laughing. He covered his mouth with both hands and said, "I'm sorry, I'm sorry," then snorted helplessly through his fingers and said, "Capiche - oh, God, capiche," and at that the man with the pistol raised the pistol and shot Anders right in the head.

4. PURE IDEOLOGY

An extremely exciting thing about the story is that Tobias Wolff does not end it here but the narrator goes on in his head to show us what has happened to Anders in this course of complete change. In few milliseconds that the bullet is in the brain the narrator artistically first talks about what Anders does not remember about his past life and then about things he remembers. Paying a close attention to the details of things it can be understood what has happened to him in the final moments of his life. Things he does not remember are those which in real life he always has been thinking about them as memories or even if in everyday life he hasn't been remembering the memories he has lived them because of being his own ideologies and attitudes. On the other hand things he remembers come purely from a part of his soul which he has never been able to seek and see them in his real life because the ideologies of the society has put a wail on them.

The list of things he does not remember is as follows. I come up with my own interpretation for each of them to show that they are ideological.

1st. He does not remember his first lover; it is an ideological love which wears away: "before it came to irritate him" in fact remembering such thing means that you still believe love goes away by the passage of time. Actually the point is nothing has a border. When it comes to a frame it becomes ideological. Exactly like this line that I am writing. I mean the very moment that I say nothing has border this sentence becomes ideological!

2nd. His wife: which is the consequence of another ISA (family) and "her predictability" which ideology encourages Anders to believe that his wife is so. Actually by wife I meant the marriage which is a social institution (Althusser 143).

3rd. His little daughter while she is threatening her puppet: "she lectured her bear about his naughtiness and described the truly appalling punishments Paws would receive unless he changed his ways." The very example of RSA is manifested. Not only is the whole society under the influence of RSA the family as an ISA needs to internalize this violence as RSA in order not to break laws. And here even the little girl is trapped by ideology (Althusser 137).

4th. Line of the hundreds of poems he had committed to memory in his youth this is a good sign to feel important and knowledgeable in a society. Knowing something by heart is an ideology taught by the School ISA (Althusser 144).

5th. Surprise of seeing a college classmate's name on the jacket of a novel:

Expectations are cultural products and ideologies. In a relationship people start having expectations toward each other. Since society forms upon ideology, every outcome coming out of it is ideological. He goes on with the feeling of respect he had for him after reading the book. Respect is another ideology (cultural ISA) individuals are taught to expect people who are more experienced and more knowledgeable (Althusser 144).

6th. Anti-war rally, which as a movement in direct contrast to the social rules, is an ideology against the dominant ideology. And consequently being beaten by police forces. Here not only is the resistance ideological, but also it is suppressed by RSA (ideology in ideology) (Althusser 137).

7th. The pile of books for reviewing and the fact that many of them made him get angry at their writer for writing them. It goes without saying that evaluation and passing judgment are ideological notions (In a way it can be related to legal ISAs) (Althusser 144).

5. ANDERS SHOUTS "THEY IS..."

The other thing which Wolff talks about is the thing he remembers: in the writer of this paper's opinion what he remembers is his present changed state of being, his oppressed part of soul and a forgotten self.

Heat, A baseball field, Yellow grass, the whirr of insects, himself leaning against a tree as the boys of the neighborhood gather for a pickup game. He looks on as the others argue the relative genius of Mantle and Mays. They have been worrying this subject all summer, and it has become tedious to Anders: an oppression, like the heat.

As illustrated all images are natural and remembering himself as a person separated from the boys can be an irony for being far from the ideology. (ideology roots from society) Maybe the next paragraph illuminates what I am trying to say:

Then the last two boys arrive, Coyle and a cousin of his from Mississippi . . . someone asks the cousin what position he wants to play. "Shortstop," the boy says. "Short's the best position they

is.” Anders turns and looks at him. He wants to hear Coyle’s cousin repeat what he’s just said, but he knows better than to ask. The others will think he’s being a jerk, ragging the kid for his grammar. But that isn’t it, not at all - it’s that Anders is strangely roused, elated, by those final two words, their pure unexpectedness and their music. He takes the field in a trance, repeating them to himself.

It is amazing. The boy makes a grammatical mistake. Everybody think of him as a jerk. But Anders loves it. Anders repeats the sentence to himself as a mantra. He loves the music hidden in the sentence and especially the final two words.

Let us think straight, first, there is no such thing in English as “they is”. Second, there is no joy defined for music like this because the sentence is completely non-grammatical. Third, he repeats the wrong sentence. All of these three forms are different forms of resistance to ideology. And the proof to my words is that all these years he hasn’t remembered these things and has just repressed them. But the narrator does not end here. The story finishes when actually he is dead but the sound is just still there. *They is they is*. The resistance remains and echoes itself.

CONCLUSION

People are presented and introduced ideologies; ideologies are taken for granted and unconsciously like elements of a good short story, book or a movie, have been lived and have made lives or have made critiques to different attitudes towards reading and writing or making movies. In another word, ideologies have given a road map to live and judge life like that of a critic’s with which s/he reviews a movie or book. Having an analogy between Anders as a person who has internalized frameworks of a good literary work and himself as an ideological creature (a person who has fully internalized ideological forms or ISAs), exactly like the moment Anders starts to criticize a work of art he enters the world of fiction in which frames are different in comparison to the real world (of ideology). He is not identified with and understood by people and thieves so he is sent out of the circle of ideology on account of being a nuisance, inharmonious and non-grammatical. This leads him to the other world. World of death maybe, in which he remembers one day of his life that he had visited someone (interestingly a foreigner to the circle of friends) who was regarded as a pain in the neck, inharmonious and his words were assumed as non-grammatical. He remembers he loved the boy and the way he utters: “they is” while others hated him. And he does not ever remember anything from the world of ideology

which is ordered, and absolutely grammatical.

Here resistance occurs when an element of the given society sticks out and goes against the norms; this cannot be conscious because it would be considered as Althusser says another form of ideology but when it goes to the realm of unconscious it cannot simply be judged as another ideological form; since it does not disobey fixed internalized norms out of knowledge but due to and through being unaware. Wolff masterfully has shown this form of resistance which justifiably displays an unconscious resistance in the world of his story.

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