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COMMONISM AND IDEOLOGY IN ALI SMITH'S "COMMON"

Abstract: This paper deals with alternative modes of human existence as presented in Ali Smith's short story "Common" (2009). Commonism, according to Nico Dockx and Pascal Gielen is a new radical ideology that is based on the values of sharing, common intellectual ownership and new social co-operations. The notion of the alternative will be examined through the analysis of the characters' in/capability to diverge from dominant ideologies as well as the analysis of the degree of alienation and liberation from both outside authority and one's "disunited existence" (Fromm 1956) which prevents one from accepting the alternative commonist ideology. The main goal is to examine how oppressive ideologies affect both adults and children presented in the story and to determine what enables them to seek alternative ways of dealing with existence and morality. This paper addresses how family and interpersonal relationships contribute to the development of one's method of dealing with the issue of human existence. Furthermore, the theoretical framework of the paper is based on Erich Fromm's and Eduardo Galeano's thoughts and writings on the state of human existence in the modern world, as well as Althusser's thoughts on ideology and its influences.

Key words: alternatives, Ali Smith, common, commonist, ideology, ideological state apparatuses

1. Introduction to Commonism

The very first sentence in the book *Commonism: A New Aesthetics of the Real* (2018) establishes that "every ideology is good at hiding the fact that it is one", which is what essentially makes it an ideology. The authors of the book point out that: "every ideology claims realism", and thus shapes society as 'real' and true; ultimately, something that ought to be accepted and not questioned. Furthermore, when one accepts any imposed ideology as true and lets it influence their perception, decision-making and judgment of both their own self and others, it becomes difficult to imagine an alternative. This brings to mind a phrase that is commonly attributed to Frederick Jameson and Slavoj Žižek, which states that: "it is easier to imagine the end of the world than it is to imagine the end of capitalism" (Fisher, 2009, p. 6). Of course, this statement is not exclusively tied to capitalism but can be applied to any deeply ingrained ideology or belief system, whether it be a political or religious one.

One possible contemporary alternative which emerges after a long period of neoliberalism, and which is still on the margins but slowly gaining attention,

is the commons. This belief system proposes that social relationships can replace those based around money and that peer relationships could develop new means of production. Moreover, most commoners concur that contemporary democracy no longer stands for true democracy, but that it merely serves the financial elite (Dockx and Gielen, 2018, p.54–55). It represents an alternative to neoliberalism which holds the negative image of an ideology that deceives the masses, just like all other ideologies which preceded it. Ultimately, commonism is still a cultural product that is not necessarily true or false¹ (Žižek, 2012, p.7), but it still claims realism and its proponents take a different approach by claiming awareness of that fact.

However, according to Belgian sociologist of culture, Pascal Gielen, commonism existed long before people talked about and had a concept of politics. In one of his interviews, he gives a simplified definition of what commonism stands for. He emphasizes that we can talk about common things or a system of commons and collective sharing of resources. These resources can be material, like water, air, other natural resources, space, etc.; and we can talk about immaterial resources such as language and culture, but also knowledge, history, shared traits, opinions, experiences, emotions and feelings. A simple example of commons would be a regular conversation between or among people, a conversation which is not regulated by any governing body and where the participants are not paid to talk to each other but are just exchanging things for free (“Pascal Gielen: On Commonism”, n.d.).

However, in order to grasp the meaning of commonism one first must understand the meaning of individuation. The notion of individuation starts with the belief that people are beings separate in their nature. Unlike the members of the animal world, who operate by relying on their instincts, humans are beings who are gifted with self-awareness and reasoning capabilities, which set them apart from the rest of the world. But humankind also yearns to liberate itself from this feeling of isolation and reforge its broken connection to the world. Fromm describes the condition of humanity by saying that:

Man is gifted with reason; he is *life being aware of itself*; he has awareness of himself, of his fellow man, of his past, and of the possibilities of his future. This awareness of himself as a separate entity, the awareness of his own short life span, of the fact that without his will he is born and against his will he dies, that he will die before those whom he loves, or they before him, the awareness of his aloneness and separateness, of his helplessness before the forces of nature and of society, all this makes his separate, disunited existence an unbearable prison. He would become insane could he not liberate himself from this prison and reach out, unite himself in some form or other with men, with the world outside (Fromm, 1956, p. 8).

Additionally, in his interview with Patrick Madden, Eduardo Galeano calls humanity “an archipelago of disconnected islands”, saying that we live in a world of separation in which a continual process of fragmentation occurs. First, a process of

¹ According to Žižek, ideology has nothing to do with deception or illusion and that it is not exactly true or false, because ultimately the ideological content itself does not matter, but the way it is related to others.

dis-integration starts within each one of us and then spreads to our relationships with others (Madden, 2001, p. 186).

However, before one attempts to reconnect, they must free themselves from the isolating prison of individuation. In order to achieve that, they must realise that they are imprisoned in the first place. However, obtaining a mindset in which one can realise the state of their imprisonment is far from an easy task. Namely, there are various external factors in the form of society and current dominant ideology, that operate based on the principle of separation which prevents the individual from attaining liberty. Furthermore, having spent too much time in a state of a “disunited existence” (Fromm, 1956, p. 8), humans are even more susceptible to manipulation and submission to the norms of the current dominant ideology.

In his essay *Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses*, Louis Althusser points out how ideology can manipulate people to create a sense of false freedom within them. He explains how the mystery of man’s false freedom lies in the ambiguity of the term “subject”. Namely, a subject could either stand for a person responsible for their actions or a subjected being who answers to a higher authority. Althusser explains that the ambiguity is in the fact that: “the *individual is interpellated as a (free) subject in order that he shall (freely) accept his subjection, i.e., so that he shall make the gestures and actions of his subjection “all by himself”* (Althusser, 2014, p. 85).

By explaining his view of the position of people within society, Althusser is broadening the definition of an individual. No longer is an individual merely someone who is defined by their separation from the world around them, they are imprisoned in the world they live in, all the while still maintaining a false sense of freedom. Furthermore, Galeano, whom Smith directly quotes in her short story, says in his interview with Jonah Raskin that the dominant culture teaches us that the other is a threat, meaning that even our fellow human beings are seen as dangerous (Raskin, 2009, p.2). Additionally, being aware that the current ideology is also maintained through the employment of technological advancements, Galeano states:

We have become the servants of our machines. We are the machines of our machines. Without a doubt, the new tools of communication can be very useful if they are in our service- not the opposite. Cars drive us. Computers program us. Supermarkets buy us (ibid., p.2).

Therefore, one is made aware not only of the state of subjection that permeates the relationship between man and ideology but also of the nature of said subjection. Ideology keeps one in the state of individuation and imprisonment by creating a feeling within them that the outside world and its inhabitants pose a threat, thus contradicting the inner yearning for reconnecting with the world and healing one’s broken bond with it. Moreover, ideology takes advantage of cultural and technological inventions to further deepen and reaffirm man’s subjection within ideology. It uses tools such as computers and cars, and inventions such as money to make human beings feel like they are free and in power, whereas they serve to prevent them from finding love through reuniting and reconnecting with other human beings, nature and the world. Thus, human beings are unable to recognise the commonalities which

connect them to others. They are too immersed in their egocentric mindsets to realise that the cure for separation lies in recognising what they have in common with others, in recognizing the interdependence and interconnectedness among human beings as well as other species, as well as that: “no place is more important than any other place, no person is more important than another person” (Raskin, 2009, p.3). One could say that failing to see the common in others also prevents people from participating in the “universal human” (Tom Leonard, 2009, p.55).²

It is also important to note that the theme of fragmentation in literature has resurged at the turn of the 21st century as a possible way to deal with the contemporary, fast-paced life of social media and essentially meaningless overcommunication present in everyday life (Guignery and Drag, 2019, p.xi).

2. “Common”

2.1. Hugh Whittaker

Ali Smith’s short story contains four protagonists (Hugh and Katherine Whittaker, their son Lewis and his friend Eleanor) and is narrated from two points of view. The story begins from the view of the father, Hugh Whittaker, who offsets the story with his fairly egotistical musings where he gives insight into his thoughts on forgiveness and love. Namely, he briefly recounts the moment when his Achilles tendon snapped and declares that he forgives his wife for it. Even though his wife, Katherine, had in all reality nothing to do with his injury, his immediate reaction is to blame somebody else for the danger that his body was put in, showcasing Galeano’s belief that the dominant ideology is teaching people to perceive everyone as a threat:

In the split second when all he’d known was the kicked-by-the-invisible-horse-in-the-back-of-the-leg of it, the precise moment that his brain reasoned that Katherine (who had been a hundred yards away in reality, back in the car park, doing something at the boot of the car) *of course* was to blame, *had* to be to blame, *must* have caught him in the back of his calf with the toe of one of her prohibitively expensive shoes or the knife-sharp point of the shoe’s stiletto- he found himself thinking it: *I forgive her* (Smith, 2009, p. 115).

Although his thoughts are presented in third-person narration, his self-centeredness is inescapable. While praising himself for his existence and importance, he mistakes his self-centeredness for love and concludes that he forgives his wife because he loves her. However, his thoughts are constantly interrupted by the sound of birds going ‘hew hew hew’ which is phonetically similar to his name. The reader cannot help but feel imprisoned along with him inside his head, rationalizing that the outside world, in this case, his wife Katherine, is a threat upon himself, but that he, because he loves her, can graciously forgive her for her transgressions.

² In his poem “A Humanist” Tom Leonard talks about the “universal human” who is “inclusive and absolute, there is no individual outside it. This sense of the universal human is the home of all those who have won through to become themselves.”

Additionally, the third-person narration may also point to the sense of fragmentation and detachment of his inner being.

Hugh's egotistical musings are interrupted by Eleanor Fitzgerald, who decides to intrude upon the family's Sunday afternoon ritual. We become privy to the importance of Eleanor Fitzgerald as soon as Hugh opens the door for her. She simply walks in without any preamble and Hugh is left standing "between the two open doors" (ibid., p.117). Symbolically, the doors of his egotistical prison are blasted open for a short while and he is given the chance to free himself. However, this moment lasts merely a second before Hugh is overwhelmed with feelings of panic and anxiety at the intrusion and struggles to shut all the doors, foreshadowing that he is going to struggle against any attempt of liberation offered to him.

Throughout the short story, Eleanor constantly challenges both Hugh and his wife with her political beliefs by talking about historical events and human rights, making it slowly obvious that both know very little about the world and are quite disconnected from what is going on. However, the crucial moment in the whole interaction is when Eleanor directly questions Hugh's connection to the world by inquiring about what he had read in the paper that day. She presents him with a perfect opportunity for a prison break, an opportunity to realize that he is disconnected from the world and incarcerated within himself. When put on the spot, Hugh panics under pressure, because he is simply too afraid, too indoctrinated to break free. His whole being is alarmed at the possibility of acknowledging and admitting that he knows little of the world, of leaving the security of his imprisonment, so he breaks out in a sweat. However, his wife comes to his assistance when both see a threat in Eleanor and the process of liberation is stopped, with Hugh once again safe in his prison cell. In the end, he refuses to reach out and attempt to bridge together the disconnected islands of the archipelago, as Galeano refers to them. In order to create an emotional distance from the possibility of a breakdown, the perspective shifts to Hugh's son Lewis who notes:

His father had a line on his forehead. It was made of sweat.

Just one, Mr. Whittaker, Eleanor Fitzgerald said. Any single fact that you remember reading in the paper this morning.

I—uh, his father said. Uh—.

His mother interrupted.

What was that thing, Hugh, you told me this morning, about violins, she said.

His mother pinked, looked sheepish. His father looked astonished.

Yes, his father said. Violins. Wait. The really old kind, they're one of, of, the only things in the world that never lose their true monetary value in an economic downturn.

No matter how bad the downturn. There, Ellie. How's that for a fact? Eh?

He saw the look pass between his parents.

It meant: *gotcha* (Smith, 2009, p. 127).

2.2. Lewis Whittaker

The second point of view offered in the story is that of Lewis Whittaker. Even though he is the one who invites Eleanor to their home, during the whole visit he says very little. He is merely an observer of the interaction between his parents and Eleanor

and one of the few comments he contributes to the conversation concerns the origin of his name. Even though his parents named him after an island in Scotland where they went on their honeymoon, he prefers to tell people that he is named after his old neighbour, Heloise Chaplin, who broke out of the hospital before she passed away.

Reading his recollections about his neighbour makes it obvious how profound of an effect Heloise Chaplin had on his childhood. They bore no blood relation to one another, but she insisted he calls her Great Aunt Hel. She represented his one connection to the world, to other human beings. Through her photographs and company, he was able to gain insight into her century-old life and to establish a loving and caring relationship with another person. That relationship was strongly denied by his parents, who did not understand it and thought Heloise to be an insane old neighbour who only represented a threat to their reputation.³ His mother would deny any blood relation to her and would not allow him overnight hospital visitations.

Through his relationship with Heloise, Lewis, in a way, managed to transfigure and claim his reality. In his interview with Madden, Galeano talks about photographs being a transfiguration of reality because they depend on the angle of the photo, the point of view of the photographer and on where he is standing. He says that points of view are always subjective, “therefore, every act of creation, not just literature, is subjective” (Madden, 2001, p. 184). By phrasing it like this, Galeano is implying that one has the power to influence reality by offering their point of view, which would mean that it is not so much objective but composed of numerous subjective experiences. Smith uses a similar thought to illustrate different points of view within her short story. She contrasts the point of view of a father who is disunited with the world and too immersed within the dominant ideology to even think about liberating himself with the point of view of a son who was able to forge a connection with another human, is still not completely manipulated by ideology and can find commonalities and forge relations with people around him, thus creating an ideology and a reality of his own. Additionally, Smith contrasts their different understandings of love. While Hugh frequently throughout his musings mechanically asserts that he loves his wife, Lewis comes to his own conclusions about what love is. He observes his father and realises: “the terrible knowledge that your father was dial-up in an age of broad-band” (Smith, 2009, p. 122). Regarding his mother, he says that: “Love was the broken plates of a dinner service, thrown away in a black bin-bag as if the plates had never existed, the breakage had never happened” (ibid., p. 122). His thoughts on love are like himself— adolescent. He is still developing and therefore, his definitions of love have room for growth and improvement. The most important thing is that he is not imprisoned and disunited, like his parents, but that he is open to making connections and reuniting with the world, and thus one step closer to reaching the love which Fromm writes about (Fromm, 1956, p.9).

³ Such cross-generational relationships between characters are not uncommon for Smith’s writing – there is a similar one in her novel *Autumn* between Daniel Gluck, a 101 year old songwriter and 32 year old Elisabeth Demand who had been his next door neighbour as a young child.

2.3. Eleanor Fitzgerald and Katherine Whittaker

Eleanor's and Katherine's points of view are not included in the story, yet they have very important roles. Most information on Katherine is second-hand and comes from her husband, who portrays her as constantly occupied by her phone or her computer, with very little communication between the two of them. Hugh also mentions her preparing recipes from the newspaper and being upset because the local store did not have the necessary ingredients. She is completely disconnected from reality and under the influence of ideology through ideological state apparatuses and has become a servant of the machines she uses. The very communication devices she is constantly glued to serve to further isolate her from her family, and when she does engage, she communicates indirectly and plays the role of a "good subject" by reminding everyone of the rules of proper behaviour:

Maybe Ellie is finding it too chilly in here, his mother said to nobody in particular.

It meant: *she better do as I say right now*.

In fact, I'm the exact right temperature, thank you, Eleanor Fitzgerald said.

You won't be able to hear properly with your hat on, his mother said.

It meant: *it's your last chance* (Smith, 2009, p.119).

She constantly behaves in a manner of a perfect subject, working "all by herself" (Althusser, 2014, p.85), which is why it comes as a shock that, at the end of the story, she is the one who breaks free from her prison of individuation and not her husband. Her realisation comes as a delayed reaction to the interaction with Eleanor, and it does not just liberate her, it snaps her out of her state of disconnection. Oddly enough, she comes to her realisation while thinking about photographs. Namely, one of the previous comments during a conversation with her husband was about Eleanor being taken to the police station for taking photographs of the policemen. Katherine starts thinking whether that is illegal and since when, all the while "sitting there making the little noises — snap snapity snap snap snapity" (ibid., p.129). Again, there is an emphasis on the point of view. It seems as if one can break from the state of a "disconnected island" (Madden, 2001, p.186) by accepting the existence of different points of view, and the fact that what everyone has in common is that they are different from one another, paradoxically making them the same. With the final snap of her laptop, Katherine breaks free from her role as a servant of the machine and ideology and goes to look for Eleanor, for she now recognizes that they have something in common. Smith emphasizes the violent and sudden nature of this epiphanic realisation through the onomatopoeic use of the word *snap*, which in this case mimics the sound of a camera shutter (something apparently illegal that requires the attention of the Repressive State Apparatus that is the police) and the sound of Katherine closing her laptop (a technological medium through which Ideological State Apparatuses are delivered to her). Moreover, through this act, she reclaims the subjectivity Galeano speaks of, the view that one can establish meaningful contact through the medium of a photograph.

As for Eleanor Fitzgerald, she plays the role of a catalyst or an instigator of change within the Whittaker family. She might even be seen as one of the

spoilsports⁴ from Harold Pinter's plays. She is everything the Whittakers are not, free, opinionated, vegetarian, aware of the world around her, and as she defines herself, "a commonist", believing "in things in common, not just between people but across the species" (Smith, 2009, p.121). Here Smith, in a way, provides her own definition of commonism. For her being a commonist assumes the existence of common traits across species. Such a belief comes as a consequence of studying Pythagoras' philosophy of metempsychosis⁵ which assumes the transmigration of the soul (Pellò, 2018, p. 135). Therefore, according to Pythagoras, the implication that a human soul can inhabit the body of an animal signifies a kinship between the two species (Violin, 1990, p.123). Consequently, killing animals is regarded as murder and eating them is an act of cannibalism. Violin points out that Pythagoras regarded butchers to be impervious to the cries of their victims, even though their cries are like those produced by human infants (ibid.). In connection to this, one could regard executioners in a similar fashion, since they can be considered part of the Repressive State Apparatuses. They act according to the rules and regulations they are presented with and perform their jobs in a desensitized manner which requires viewing human beings as the other that represents a possible danger and ought to be destroyed.

Eleanor turns the Whittakers' world upside down, coincidentally by directly quoting Galeano's *Upside-Down* (1998). She declares: "The worst violators of nature and human rights never go to jail. They hold the keys" (Galeano, 1998). One of the possible reasons Eleanor quotes this sentence could be that she is trying to point out how human beings are the ones holding the keys to their freedom. People are described as 'violators of nature and human rights' because they deny themselves the unification with the world around them and with other human beings, they deny themselves the human right to practice love. Moreover, they never go to jail because they are already inside it without being aware of it. Eleanor also tries to make the Whittakers understand the interconnectedness of the world by explaining the makings of the original Magna Carta, which was written in an ink that was made from soot, wasp-liquid and tree sap, further elaborating on the role of wasps in creating ink. However, at that moment, the Whittakers are not able to acknowledge that things in common exist among people, let alone across species.

Smith continues the cross-generational expansion of the definition of commonism through the sharing of the same name or surname, which was also present in Lewis' case. Namely, Eleanor is a shared name for every second generation of women in her mother's family and is one of the ways in which they forge meaningful relationships with one another.

⁴ In the plays of Harold Pinter there is always a character referred to as a spoilsport who refuses to play according to ideological and societal rules and who challenges the established norms.

⁵ Metempsychosis is a belief that one's soul transmigrates after death into another body, including those of animals.

3. Concluding Remarks

To conclude, a close reading of Ali Smith's short story reveals certain connections to the theory of commonism. If one considers what Fromm, Galeano and Althusser say on the problems of human existence and the role and nature of ideology, man is a being prone to seclusion and separation from the world. He is disunited with external reality and imprisoned within himself with the assistance of external factors such as ideology and technology. In order to once again reunite himself with another being or the world, and to regain the feeling of interdependence and interconnectedness, man must acknowledge the existence of other points of view apart from his own and the things he has in common with them. Man must break free from his subjection and recognise what is subjective both in him and in others, so that he can ultimately reconnect himself to the "universal human" (Leonard, 2009, p. 55), i.e., an archipelago of now connected islands. The process of breaking free from one's ideological imprisonment is a difficult one and one's first instinct is to oppose it and remain within the isolating fetters of ideology. However, sometimes it comes suddenly and all at once, snapping one out of it in a second. What is most important is to keep oneself open to the possibility of connection, not only to other people but to other species, nature and history. Only then would one be able to realise the "common heritage of mankind" and practise values such as "environmentalism, interdependence, interconnectedness and participation in world peace."

Through her writing, Smith provides information that broadens the definition of commonism, giving it wider meaning as an existential solution in addition to a political and economic one. Furthermore, she brings attention to the role of children within ideology and gives them a higher level of awareness of commonalities that exist across species and history. This level of awareness is possible as they have not yet completely formed their personalities, nor are they good or fragmented subjects. This ability to resist conforming to dominant ideology is seen in their response to the influence of Ideological State Apparatuses. Namely, they retain the ability to doubt and question the educational system and turn to alternative sources of input, thus claiming their own reality and forming independent ideologies or sets of values representative of their chosen modes of living.

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Dušica Ljubinković

KOMONIZAM KAO ALTERNATIVA POTLAČENOM POSTOJANJU U KRATKOJ PRIČI „COMMON“ ALI SMIT

Rezime

U radu se govori o alternativnim modusima ljudskog postojanja predstavljenim u kratkoj priči „Common“ autorke Ali Smit, objavljene 2009. godine. Niko Doks i Paskal Gilen definišu komonizam kao novu radikalnu ideologiju baziranu na principima deljenja, zajedničkog intelektualnog vlasništva i novih društvenih saradnji. U radu se sagledava pojam alternative kroz analizu ne/mogućnosti likova da se odvoje od načela dominantne ideologije, kao i analizu stepena otuđenja i oslobođenja od uticaja spoljnih autoriteta i sopstvenog razdelenog postojanja, koje sprečava usvajanje alternativne komonističke ideologije. Glavni cilj rada jeste da se istraži na koji način opresivne ideologije utiču na odrasle i decu predstavljene u kratkoj priči i da se ustanovi šta je to što im omogućava da traže alternativni način na koji bi se izborili sa problemima postojanja i moraliteta. Teorijski okvir ovog rada je zasnovan na promišljanjima i delima Eriha Froma i Edvarda Galeana o problemu ljudskog postojanja u modernom svetu, kao i Altiserovom stavu o ideologiji i njenom uticaju. Zatim, u radu se razmatra i kako obrazovanje, porodica i međuljudski odnosi doprinose kreiranju rešenja za problem ljudskog postojanja.

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