



## INSTITUTIONALISATION AND INTERPELLATION IN BLAKE'S "THE CHIMNEY SWEEPER"

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### ABSTRACT

William Blake's poem "The Chimney Sweeper" of *Songs of Innocence* draws a crude image of late 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> century where children labors helplessly surrender themselves at the feet of capitalists. This paper aspires to analyze "The Chimney Sweeper" from Althusserian view of Interpellation as we see, different chimney sweepers, forgetting their own identity and pleasure, conform to the rules and norms manipulated by their master. In the midst of flourishing industrialization of late 18<sup>th</sup> century, workers really became material of production and in this way they were incorporated into institution. This paper looks into the chimney sweepers through the spectacles of Interpellation. In "The Chimney Sweeper", the course of Ideological State Apparatus has highly usurped the chimney sweep of late 18<sup>th</sup> century, which contaminated the religious, ethical and political institution in an exploitative manner.

**Key-words:** Chimney Sweeper, Production, Interpellation, industrialization, institution, production-material.

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William Blake (1757-1827), one of the most prominent poets of Romantic Age, considered the increasing need for children labor in his time a curse and threat for their innocent childhood. He expressed his view on this matter in his two poems both named "The Chimney Sweeper" written in 1789 and 1794 respectively. The first one included in *Songs of Innocence* while the second one was published in *The Songs of Experience*. The two poems are different in the capturing of the suffering of chimney sweeps because both are clearly influenced by the courses of times.

This paper aims at interpreting the production relation of the chimney sweeper and the

institution of chimney sweeping from Louis Althusser's point of view. The little chimney sweeps in *Songs of Innocence* find comfort in certain ideas imposed by their master. They are leading a horribly miserable life but they don't protest at their misery because they don't have any knowledge of their own misery.

'The Age of Industrialization' brought with it the enlarged urban population. So houses with chimneys rapidly grew and the job of chimney sweeper became much preferred. Usually poverty-afflicted parents sold their children of 4 to 6 years old to a master sweep. The master sweep treated those children as his property and they were living

life as slaves in unimaginably worst condition. The little chimney sweeps were used to climb the chimney taking brushes, collect the soot and handover it to their master sweep. They used to climb up the chimneys with their elbows, back and knees. Sometimes the little boys got stuck in the narrow 18-inch chimneys. Sometimes for climbing techniques and other times for climbing twisted chimneys they became stuck between tight walls of soot. Then a second boy would be sent to rescue the first little boy, sometimes they would both die. Occasionally the sooty walls were needed to be smashed down to find the dead children.

After the occurrence of the Great Fire of London in September 1666, the exploitation of chimney sweeps became rampant. Under the changed building regulations to prevent the repetition of the same disaster, fireplaces designed with narrow chimneys. Consequently, generations of little chimney sweeps were fated to work mercilessly dawn to dusk. They worked without any wage but the master sweep beat them if they could not work well or fast enough to conform to the master sweep. They were given little food and unhygienic place to sleep that was usually in basements on the dirty bags used to accumulate soot. The little boys were destined to live a painful life vulnerable to lung and scrotum cancer and different physical deformities.

Marxist philosopher Louis Althusser (1918-1990) introduced the term "Interpellation" as a process in which ideas of powerful class get into the mind of common class so much so that they think it as their own and those ideas start to influence their lives. In "The Chimney Sweeper", the little chimney sweeps become tools in the process of production. According to Louis Althusser, "all ideology hails or interpellates concrete individuals into concrete subjects". Interpellation is a kind of 'misrecognition'. It can be counted as "recruitment" as it asks to join a man into a position of subject. From Althusser's view, the state employs Ideological Apparatus to reproduce ideology through practices and production. He presents his main concepts regarding condition of production, theory of state and role of individual in an essay named "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatus", where he

mentions Repressive State Apparatus functions through violence and force to subdue an individual on the other hand Ideological State Apparatus uses the institutions of religion, ethics, and politics. As the production processes continue, the chimney sweeps become lifeless objects for the sake of production and reproduction.

Finally, in 1875, the system was pushed through a legislation that declared the cruel practice illegal. After that, 1880's Compulsory Education Act helped to lessen the numbers of child labor. But Interpellation in different institutions still present where people conform for their profession, societal recognition and safety.

To focus the production process in which the chimney sweeps get institutionalised, we must bring forth the concept of Louis Althusser as he says, "*I shall then suggest that ideology 'acts' or 'functions' in such a way that it 'recruits' subjects among the individuals (it recruits them all) or transforms the individuals into subjects by that very precise operation which I have called-INTERPELLATION or hailing, and which can be imagined along the lines of the most commonplace everyday police (or other) hailing 'Hey, you there!'*" Though Blake wrote his poem at the end of eighteenth century, but its idea is always contemporary. In the late 18<sup>th</sup> century and early 19<sup>th</sup> century when the Industrial Revolution was going on, the cultural and socio-economic condition in Britain received a turn. Though child labor was a common phenomenon for long ago but it possessed a gigantic figure during the Revolution because of the dreadful need for children workers. It gave impetus in the rise of capitalism. About William Blake, Alfred Kazin opines "*He was a pioneer Romantic of that heroics first generation which thought that the flames of the French Revolution would burn down all fetters.*" "*Blake's work had become more overtly political after the upheavals in France in 1789.*" (<http://www.lilith-ezine.com>). Blake had rarely gone outside of London. He observed with concentration those mills and factories which were always shadowed with smoke, Kazin elaborates Blake's observation of industrialization "*Blake was only one of many Englishman who felt himself being slowly ground to death, in a world of*

*such brutal exploitation and amid such inhuman ugliness, that the fires of the new industrial furnaces and the cries of child laborers are always in his work. His poems and designs are meant to afford us spiritual vision, a vision beyond the factory system, the hideous new cities, the degradation of children for the sake of profit, the petty crimes for which children could still be hanged. England has never recovered from its industrial revolution; Blake was afraid it could not survive it; the human cost was already too great."*

In this regard of production relation between child labor and industry, a noteworthy poem is Elizabeth Barrett Browning's poem "The Cry of the Children". She wrote the poem about 54 years after William Blake's "The Chimney Sweeper". Like Blake, Barrett Browning also shades the light on the damaging effects of child labor. Her poem says "Alas, alas, the children! They are seeking/Death in life, as best to have," on the other hand, Blake's little chimney sweep feels happy and warm in a cold morning because he is benumbed about his own misery and happiness.

Both Blake and Barrett Browning make a clear account against religious belief as a way of salvation. Browning calls God "speechless as a stone", again in Blake's poem, the angel comes with a "bright key" to exploit the boy to work hard and forget about his distress and pain. The same tone of disgust for the cruel exploitation of child labor is heard in his poem "London". The chimney sweeper of *Songs of Experience* is aware about his misery and yells at society, whereas that of *Songs of Innocence* is unable to perceive the condition in which he lives, he learns the language taught by his master and does not know that the miserable life has been thrust upon him.

Institution supports the structure in which it is situated. It always cares about interests of elite class. It imposes the kind of ideology in the society that force people to throw away their natural rights and education and lay down their dreams at its feet. Institution treats every individual as object. In capitalist society, the individual is transformed into a mechanical entity. Here, workers are like stepping stone to the masters. In Blake's "The Chimney Sweeper" of *Songs of Innocence*, we find the little

chimney sweeps become tools in the process of production.

Capitalist society absorbs the individual. Through interpellation individuals are turned into objects in the society. The chimney sweepers recognize themselves in the way their masters intend to introduce them. They lose their identity as human being. They are bound to do what their masters command them. Though the speaker feels free to choose his work what he is actually forced to do. When the speaker exploits the young chimney sweeps it seems that chimney sweeping is a great job and everybody should enjoy this work. But in the first line, we find his deprived voice complaining against his father as he sold him after his mother's death: "And my father sold me while yet my tongue/ Could scarcely cry 'Weep! Weep! Weep!/ So your chimneys I sweep, and in soot I sleep." (L-2). 'Weep' sounds similar to 'whip', that dominates the idea that the boy is whipped and forced to do chimney sweeping and sleep in soot. Soon, his complaining tone is totally vanished. He accepted the rules of his master. There is reason to believe that the speaker acts in a way as an exploiter of the wealthy class because he does not advice Tom or any other chimney sweep to leave their miserable life. Rather, he teaches them how to adjust to the system. Here, the speaker's character has been designed by the master's idea; this is how he reproduces ideology through practices.

Tom Dacre is the representative of the chimney sweeps who become object after entering into production relation. When the speaker says "That thousands of sweepers, Dick, Joe, Ned and Jack/Were all of them locked up in coffins of black" (L-11), we feel that these are not their real name. Most of them either orphan or sold by their own parents; they had no name; no family. Even the individual chimney sweeper does not know his proper name. All of them are called in a common name. The chimney sweepers do not know about parental love and the pleasure of being called in a darling name. Their childhood is trodden under the feet of capitalism. Parental callousness and hypocrisy of the society appear gaudy as they appreciate authority yet sense no compassion for their own children. They are treated like machine in

factory. The more a machine can produce the more valuable it is. In this way, a chimney sweep becomes favourite to his master if he works hard no matter if loses his hair, or even his life is in malnutrition, lung cancer or any other diseases. Reification or the process of making them concrete possession continues and they become lifeless objects for the sake of production and reproduction.

Capitalist ruling class uses both ideology and violence as instruments in order to maintain the conditions of production and reproduction. Institutions like law, religion, education system, family, politics and cultural institutions spread some ideology for their own benefit what Althusser called Ideological State Apparatus. The speaker teaches Tom how to tolerate the institutional repression when he cried at the loss of his curled hair. He said *"Hush, Tom! never mind it, for when your head's bare/ You know that the soot cannot spoil your white hair"*(L-7), he persuades Tom Dacre for acting as the master's will. Tom wants to keep his curled hair. But it is the very opposite of the dominant ideology. He immediately presents the useful side of bald head. It is true that, today or tomorrow he would lose his hair either by burning or the master would cut them. It is an essential part in the process of being a chimney sweep. From the beginning of the poem, a tone of instruction is prevalent where the boy is advised to be forbearing. They will be free if they void themselves from the sense of being happy or unhappy. It can be realized that Tom Dacre would also become a persuader of the elite class like the speaker. He would also make obedient chimney sweep like himself. Thus, Ideological State Apparatus gives impetus in the process of production.

Althusser mentions about The Repressive State Apparatus which is designed to punish anyone who rejects the dominant ideology. It is obviously direct physical punishment. The Angel is an ideological broker. The Angel promises the little boy *"if he'd be a good boy/ He'd have God for his father, and never want joy"*(L-20) To be good, here means to never want joy. The little boy would slowly lose his talent of enjoying childhood. His human feelings would be disappeared from his personality by the severe workload which even demands his life.

Though, there is no evidence in the whole poem that the boy is not good but the Angel implied that Tom is bad. What the Angel says sounds more like a warning than a promise which means that if Tom do something against master's will he would be punished. God is shown as savior. God is merciful. He can give the ultimate happiness and remove all the signs of poverty and grief. Tom would get God's mercy and endless joy if he obeys all the rules and regulations. The Angel allures the boy in the name of God. The exercise of repression becomes more vivid in the last stanza, *"So if all do their duty they need not fear harm"*(L-24); it is actually a threat that implies they would have physical punishment if they do not do their duty. They are freely choosing what is in fact being imposed upon them. In the very last line of the poem, we see that the little boy wakes up in a gay mood and feels warm and happy though nothing changed in his fate. But he recognizes himself as a chimney sweep, as an object in the process of production and accepts all the ideological values that institution imposed upon him.

The institutions of capitalist society are constructed upon the torment of the helpless poor. The little chimney sweeps underwent sufferings until the abolishment of the process of chimney sweeping in 1875. Being exploited through interpellation those children were turned into lifeless production materials. In Blake's "The Chimney Sweeper", it is evident that both Repressive and Ideological Apparatus were applied on them by the master to earn the most estimated benefit. In February of 1875, when George Brewster, a twelve year old boy got stuck to the sooty walls and smothered, then died thereafter, a discontentment took place among the conscious city-dwellers. Lord Shaftesbury, a social reformer, started his campaign against sending little boys up the chimneys and finally, in September of the same year, he succeeded to persuade Parliament to pass the 'Chimney Sweepers Act' to prohibit this process of chimney sweeping.

In the modern world, still, child labor is a familiar phenomenon where children are forced to work hard and are treated like slaves. Like Blake's chimney sweeper, they also are used as material in the production-process and that follows institutional

repression. Though many organizations are trying to stop this inhuman practice throughout the world, but in most of the third-world countries, even in some of the developed countries, poor children are more vulnerable to be used as slave. Some shocking ways of modern-day child slavery are: dancing boys of Afghanistan, who are sold to wealthy men and forced to dance, most of the times, are subjected to sexual abuse; forced begging system in Senegal where the little children compelled by their teacher to earn money for them; the virgin shrine girls in West Africa - they are forced to be sex-slave of the priests whom they have to consider as god's representative; the use of children as camel jockey in Persian Gulf who give pleasure to wealthy and many more exploitation of children are prevailing in the world. To stop these exploitations, only law enforcement and religious condolence are not enough, a compassionate vision of people for all races and ages is required, through which everyone consider other as his own family. As children are the architect of future, a world, free from exploitation and institutional repression of poor children, can hold the highest happiness for all of her offspring.

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