

Ideology of Status in Nikolay Gogol's "Diary of a Madman" and "The Overcoat"**Swagato Chakraborty**

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Abstract:

This paper aims to show how Nikolay Gogol portrayed and critiqued the ideology of status in two of his short stories, "Diary of a Madman" and "The Overcoat". The paper begins by briefly discussing the concept of ideology and then analyzes the ideology prevalent in Gogol's contemporary Tsarist bureaucracy, revealing that an ideology of status was the cornerstone of bureaucratic sociopolitical consciousness. On the basis of this discovery, the paper then analyzes the two aforementioned stories and shows how Gogol portrayed and critiqued the ideology of status as capable of distorting reality, guiding the characters' actions and eventually leading them to destruction. The paper concludes by pointing to the fact Gogol also showed the two-pronged nature of ideology wherein an ideology always rises from real life conditions and then ends up intervening in that very life. In doing so, this paper hopes to bring attention towards a serious literary study of Gogol's works which can help us to liberate our own contemporary times from falling prey to the ideology of status.

Keywords: ideology, ideology of status, bureaucracy, Russian literature, Tsarism.**Introduction:**

This paper aims to show that Nikolay Gogol (1809 – 1852) – one of the masters of nineteenth century Russian literature – explored effects of the ideology of status in his short stories "Diary of a Madman" (1835) and "The Overcoat" (1842). Through the actions of the characters in these stories as well as their responses to the events of the plot, Gogol has presented us with his comments regarding this ideology of status. Of course, the ideology of status under scrutiny here belongs to the bureaucracy, as the characters in both of these texts are bureaucrats themselves. This is prime ground for the author as he himself served briefly as a "government clerk" when he first arrived in St. Petersburg (Davydov 123). This exposure helped him observe the bureaucratic circle from the inside, and thus it is no surprise that most of his oeuvre feature entry-level bureaucrats. Hence, he was also located in a place to explore and comment on the ideology of status and superiority running rampant in the Tsarist bureaucracy, a task he brilliantly undertakes in "Diary of a Madman" and "The Overcoat".

Through these texts, Gogol shows us how ideology is two-pronged. It originates from the conditions of real life and then ends up influencing that very life. It has the ability to construct (or in this case destruct) our sense of reality, and in terms of Gogol, might lead us on a path detrimental to ourselves or other people.

Gogol was born in Ukraine but migrated to mainland Russia after he graduated school. A man of many ambitions, Gogol's initial forays into the literary arts were not warmly received. However, it was only when he turned to the short story that his literary talent was recognized. His first anthology *Evenings on a Farm Near Dikanka* (1831–1832) proved to be a success (Mirsky 144). The short story would continue to be the author's most preferred form and he would bring out both anthologies as well as single pieces. In Gogol's stories we find a deep understanding of the tragicomedy of life, of the hypocrisies that mark bourgeois society and of course, the ideological considerations that dictate our choices. This last facet is this paper's object of study and will be analyzed in the following sections. However, in order to achieve this objective, the paper must deal with the question ideology and the historical reality of Tsarist bureaucracy, out of which the concept of ideology of status will be derived. These three notions would then inform our ultimate analysis of Gogol's texts.

A Note on Ideology:

Ideology is a contested term, not only in the world of politics but also in the realm of critical theory. Such is the disagreement that it makes one "doubtful that there is any conceptual unity to the term" (Roberts). Different philosophers have opined different ideas about ideology but delving into all of them is beyond the scope of this paper. Yet, we need at least a basic idea of ideology in order to analyze Gogol's texts. Hence, the paper proposes this basic (and inclusive) statement about ideology – "an ideology refers to the belief systems of a person about the world and/or themselves, originating from their location within their contemporary modes of production." This definition is not arbitrary and has three reasons of being. Firstly and most importantly, this is the conception of ideology that is most identical to Gogol's treatment of it in the two stories. Hence, this definition closely follows the texts. Secondly, it is inclusive to the most basic notions of different theories of ideology (that ideology is a belief system should not be too readily challenged by any line of thought) and lastly because, it bases itself on the base/superstructure reality of society. In this last part, this basic definition borrows from the fact that ideology "must rather be explained from the contradictions of material life, from the existing conflict between the social forces of production and the relations of production" (Marx 12). Hence, this definition of ideology – basic in its approach – becomes a just tool to analyze Gogol's texts.

However, the very next question in this regard is an equally important one. What was the ideology of the bureaucrats in Gogol's Tsarist Russia? As the prominent characters portrayed in the two texts are all bureaucrats, their ideological affiliations also become important. At the same time, it was the bureaucracy that gave rise to the ideology of status and thus developing a historical sense of Gogol's contemporary bureaucracy (i.e. Tsarist

bureaucracy) is necessary for the paper's analysis. Both of these two questions are tackled in the following section.

The Tsarist Bureaucracy and the ideology of status:

It was Peter the Great who introduced the 'Table of Ranks' for the civil bureaucratic services in 1722. It organized the service and introduced step-by-step promotions for a civil servant. An attempt to modernize the Tsarist state, the Table also "promised ennoblement to any commoner who attained a sufficiently high level of rank" (Hassell 283). Meritocratic in nature, the Table itself became the catalyst to the problems that Tsarist bureaucracy was to be plagued with till its final fall in 1917. The promise of ennoblement as well as the preference that was given to bureaucrats who already hailed from noble backgrounds (Hassell 292), resulted into an obsession with ranks and titles. Hence, rather than merit, "rank and titles themselves had become highly valued as status symbol" (Hassell 290). In fact, Vogler has called the Tsarist bureaucracy to be "highly insufficient" where "social selectivity and patronage" held the sway over an "undeveloped or nonexistent" merit (814). Therefore, the Tsarist bureaucrats, a century down the line, were "either a petty dictator towards his underlings who was simultaneously sycophantic towards his superiors, or alternatively a downtrodden [...] creature..." (Davydov 123).

Thus, the ideology of the Tsarist bureaucrat can be called an 'ideology of status' where achieving and holding on to status, rank or title was the cornerstone of bureaucratic sociopolitical consciousness. Gogol's own texts bear testament to the fact. Stories like "The Nose", "The Carriage" and even the two stories analyzed by this paper also note this ideology of status. Status was important for bureaucrats as it was a source of authority. As sociologist Rao explains "authority and status always go together. Though individuals exercise authority, it is always related to statuses and not individuals, in normal cases" (116). Such machinations of authority were important because the bureaucrat was (and is) an intellectual who cannot perform the most basic of intellectual function – organize and direct society – and can only obey the ruling establishment (Gramsci 13). Thus, clinging on to status became the kernel of the bureaucratic ideology and this is the ideology that Gogol portrays and critiques in his stories.

Ideology in "Diary of a Madman":

The ideology of status can be seen in "Diary of a Madman" through the actions of its narrator – Aksenty Poprishchin – a lower bureaucrat who loses total control of his conscious mind. This sliding into 'madness', as Gogol shows, is also aggravated by Poprishchin's ideology. Poprishchin is a Tsarist bureaucrat, and from our discussions above, it is clear that he would be liable to believe in the ideology of status. This is directly hinted in the text itself. For example, when a footman asks him to call it a day, Poprishchin comments "I can't stand that brood of flunkies [...] Don't you know, ignorant peasant, that I am a civil servant and of noble birth?" (Gogol 178). This ideology becomes a refrain for him and occurs multiple times throughout the text, guiding his actions.

Gogol also shows us how this ideology prevents Poprishchin from seeing the truth. When the head of the department realizes that Poprishchin is attracted to Sophie, the

Director's daughter, he gives him a – no doubt harsh – dressing down. However, he refuses to see whatever kernels of truth the head's harsh words might have contained. Instead, he declares the head to be jealous and writes in his diary "He [the head] can go to hell! Does he think I'm the son of a commoner, or tailor, or a non-commissioned officer? I'm a gentleman! [...] I'll acquire more status than *you*" (Gogol 179). Here is a direct reference to the ideology of status, and it shows how the concern with it prevents him from seeing the truth. Due to his ideology, he cannot even consider the fact that Sophie might not agree to marry him, owing to his advanced age and livelihood. Thus it makes him totally oblivious to truths.

This same ideology also prevents him from understanding sociopolitical privilege and exploitation. Twice in the text, Poprishchin questions the dominance and privilege of the nobility, however, both times, it is his ideology of status that negates his questioning. When he realizes (or fancies) that Sophie is in love with a "gentleman of the court" (Gogol 187), he questions privilege by stating "It's always noblemen or generals. All good things in this world go to gentlemen of the court or generals" (Gogol 187). Yet, this discontent is immediately pacified by falling back into his ideology – "Hell! I'd like to be a general, not just to win her [...] but to see them crawling around after me..." (Gogol 187). Similarly, realizing (or again, fancying) that Sophie is going to be wedded to the gentleman, Poprishchin questions:

And what if he *is* a gentleman of the court? It's only a kind of distinction conferred on you, not something that you can see, or touch with your hands. A court chamberlain doesn't have a third eye [...] his nose isn't made of gold either. It's just like mine or anyone else's [...] Several times I've tried to discover the reason for these differences... (Gogol 187)

Yet again, this very important question gets nullified by his subscription to the ideology – "Why am I just a titular counsellor? Perhaps I'm really a count or a general and am merely imagining I'm a titular counsellor?" (Gogol 187). Thus, Gogol portrayed how Poprishchin's ideology of status prevents him from seeing privilege and exploitation. This is because an "illegitimate ideology hinders progress and change..." (Namboodiripad and Pillai 55) and conversely, keeps the dominant power structures alive. Thus although Poprishchin suffers due to the privilege and status given to the nobility, his ideology does not allow him to critique it.

Finally, this ideology of status results into psychosis. Unable to critique status and thereby abandon his ideology, Poprishchin falls ever deeper into it. Reading about the Spanish succession crisis in the newspaper, Poprishchin believes himself to be the king of Spain. He specifically believes himself to be the monarch because a king is supposed to have the highest status in society. It sits nicely with his ideology that demands him to aspire an ever higher status. Thus, it is the ideology of status that is the basis of Poprishchin's psychosis, and causes a total distortion of his reality. Hence, we can argue that Gogol has portrayed and critiqued the ideology of status that distorts reality for its subscriber and compels him to take actions that lead to ultimate fall.

Ideology in “The Overcoat”:

Although it is possible to analyze “The Overcoat”, in its entirety, in terms of Gogol’s critique of ideology of status, this paper will only focus on the final part of the story where this phenomena is most accurately manifested. “The Overcoat” focuses on its protagonist Akaky Akakievich, again a bureaucrat, who struggles to first buy, and then recover, his new overcoat. In this (futile) attempt to recover it, Akakievich tries to enlist the help of a certain “Important person” (Gogol 162), who is but a bureaucrat of a superior rank or position. It is in the interaction between Akakievich and the Important Person that the ideology of status becomes clearly visible.

Firstly, Gogol, in no uncertain terms have shown that the important person has succumbed to the ideology of status. This person “had become important only a short time before [...] until then he had been an *unimportant* person” (Gogol 163). However, this acquiring of status shifted his ideology. This is seen by the fact that the person was “quite a good man at heart, pleasant to his colleagues and helpful. But his promotion to general’s rank had completely turned his head; he became all mixed up, somehow went off the rails, and just could not cope any more” (Gogol 164). Thus, we can see here how the ideology resulted in a total change of attitude in him.

Furthermore, while he was jolly and at ease with people of his rank, he became taciturn with his subordinates. He, much like Poprishchin, sometimes questioned his ideology. For example, he really wanted to hold meaningful conversation with his juniors but it is his ideology that prevented him, forcing him to be “always inhibited by the thought: would this be going too far for someone in his position, would this be showing too much familiarity and therefore rather damaging to his status?” (Gogol 164). Similarly, following Akakievich’s death, he again questions his ideology but is able to forget all his doubts by attending a party where the guests “held roughly the same rank as himself...” (Gogol 170). This is similar to Poprishchin’s case where an illegitimate ideology preserves the dominant power structures by negating any critical questions in the minds of its subscribers.

Thus, the result of the interaction between him and Akakievich can already be guessed. When Akakievich arrives, the Important Person, who was conversing with a friend, asks Akakievich to wait “just to show his old friend [...] how long he could keep clerks standing about in his waiting-room” (Gogol 165). When Akakievich was called in and he began to talk about his stolen overcoat, “heaven knows why, but the general found this approach rather too familiar” (Gogol 165). This “heaven knows why” is important as Gogol has used it to hint two distinct features of the ideology of status. Firstly, it is a critique of the arbitrariness of the Important Person who finds a distressed subordinate seeking direct help “too familiar”. Of course, it is the ideology that fuels this arbitrariness and thus this act is also motivated with a view of defending or maintaining status. Secondly, it also points out to the psychological aspect of the ideology. The ideology of status has been so powerfully internalized by him that without any conscious thought (“heaven knows why”) he acts in accordance with it. It is like an unconscious switch that triggers his actions. The fact that his

rebuke of Akakievich is ideological can be gauged from his reactions after he made the latter leave – “The Important Person [...] peeped at his friend [...] to see what impression he had made. He was not exactly displeased to see that his friend was quite bewildered and was even beginning to show unmistakable signs of fear himself” (Gogol 166).

At the end of the story, Gogol portrays the haunting ability of the ideology of status. It is perhaps an accepted idea in human culture that an unsettled death results into creation of a ghost. If so, Akakievich turning into a ghost¹ following his death is culturally expected. However, why did Gogol feel the need to turn the Important Person into a ghost as well? He did it to show the persevering nature of the ideology of status. According to Orr, localized leaders “currently occupying positions of power and prestige will themselves become at most part of the organization’s afflatus, ghosts in the state machine” (1058). The Important Person – no doubt a leader in his bureaucratic office – thus committed himself to be a spectre by accepting the bureaucratic ideology of status. The ideology forever situates him into the eternal machinery of bureaucracy, even after death. No wonder that even as a literal ghost, he continues the same ideological attitudes as before and barks at a policeman asking him – “What do *you* want?” and shook its fist at him...” (Gogol 173).

Moreover, Orr argues that the idea of leadership involves “both haunting (of others) and feeling haunted (by others), and situates leadership practices as a bridge between the past, the present and the future (1058).” This exact haunted bridge is also critiqued by Gogol. Akakievich was ‘haunted’² by the ideologically-inspired dressing down from the Important Person, which was a way for the latter to assert his leadership. The ideological presence then crosses the bridge and is continued in the ghost of Akakievich who snatches away the Important Person’s coat. Finally, the bridge between the past (Akakievich being told off), the present (Akakievich’s haunting) and the future is complete by the Important Person turning into an ideologically mandated ghost. Thus, as Gogol shows, ideology persists and is spectral in its own right that follows from a realm of presence to absence, through past, present and future.

Thus, Gogol has portrayed and critiqued the ideology of status in “The Overcoat”.

Conclusion – The Two-pronged ideology:

Thus, we can sufficiently argue that Gogol has explored and critiqued the ideology of status in his short stories “Diary of a Madman” and “The Overcoat”. He showed how the ideology can determine the characters’ actions and distort the reality for them, leading them to the depths of peril and inflicting wounds on themselves and others. Besides this critique, Gogol also points out to the two-pronged nature of ideology. Firstly, ideology in general, and ideology of status in particular, stems from actual conditions of life. Both in the case of Poprishchin and the Important Person, ideology stems from their lives in the “world of economic production” (Gramsci 5). In the case of the former, it is the ideological desire to

gain bureaucratic status while in the latter, it is the ideological mandate to hold on that status. Secondly, this very same ideology intervenes in both the characters' lives, guiding them towards oblivion. Thus, this paper concludes by arguing that Gogol showed how ideology always carries this two-pronged, almost cyclic rhythm of stemming from life and then influencing that very life.

Gogol's portrayal and critique of the ideology of status rings true even for our contemporary times. We have people all around us, in our workplaces, academia, in contemporary bureaucracy as well as in government who similarly pursue the ideology of status and in doing so, harm others and themselves. A serious study of Gogol can enlighten us of the fallacies of such tendencies and liberate us from following an ideology that leads to our own destruction. Herein lies the beauty of Gogol and the eternal fragrance of his garland of stories.

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