

RELIGIOUS INTERPELLATION AND IDEOLOGICAL CONTROL IN OMAR SHAHID HAMID'S *THE PRISONER* (2013)

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Abstract

Omer Shahid Hamid's *The Prisoner* (2013) presents religious belief as a significant ideological force that shapes authority, identity, and social behaviour. Through its portrayal of religious authority, madrassahs, extremist groups, and militant violence, the novel explores how particular interpretations of faith influence individual beliefs and actions. Drawing on Louis Althusser's concepts of Ideological State Apparatuses (ISAs) and interpellation, this article examines how religious institutions and groups transmit and reproduce religious ideology. Using qualitative textual analysis, it explores how religious discourse shapes individuals' understanding of faith, duty, and obedience, encouraging them to identify with particular ideological positions. It also considers how individuals who claim religious authority can exploit religious beliefs to recruit and manipulate followers, advance their own interests, and justify militant violence. The article highlights how ideology operates through beliefs that individuals internalize and reproduce, rather than through direct coercion. By connecting religious ideology with subject formation and institutional power, the analysis shows how religious authority can influence individual behaviour and reinforce existing power relations in contemporary Pakistani society.

1. Introduction

Religion plays a significant role in Omer Shahid Hamid's *The Prisoner* (2013), which explores how religious institutions and extremist groups influence individual beliefs, identities, and actions. Set against the backdrop of terrorism, sectarian violence, and political unrest in

Pakistan, the novel examines how religious beliefs can be used to shape understandings of faith, duty, and morality. Rather than presenting extremism as a matter of individual choice alone, the narrative highlights the role of institutions and influential figures in transmitting and reinforcing particular interpretations of religion. Drawing on Louis Althusser's concepts of Ideological State Apparatuses (ISAs) and interpellation, this article examines how religious ideology shapes individuals as subjects who accept and reproduce beliefs that serve existing structures of power.

Using qualitative textual analysis, the article investigates the operation of the religious ISA and the process of interpellation in the novel. It explores how religious authority influences individual decisions, encourages obedience, and is used to legitimise violence in the name of faith. The analysis also considers how individuals who claim religious authority can exploit religious beliefs to recruit and manipulate followers and advance their own interests. By examining the relationship between religious ideology, militant violence, and institutional power, the article argues that *The Prisoner* portrays religion not only as a matter of personal belief but also as a means through which authority is exercised, ideological positions are reinforced, and existing power relations are sustained in contemporary Pakistani society.

2. Literature Review

Marxist literary criticism examines how literary texts represent social relations, ideology, and structures of power. Scholars working within this tradition have explored how dominant beliefs are maintained through social institutions and how individuals respond to the values promoted by those in authority. Antonio Gramsci's work on ideology and cultural hegemony has contributed to discussions of how dominant groups maintain their position through social and cultural influence. Louis Althusser further developed these ideas by examining the role of institutions in reproducing ideology and shaping individual identities. His work has become an important point of reference in literary criticism concerned with the relationship between ideology, subject formation, and power. For the present study, this body of thought provides a starting point for examining the representation of religious ideology and its relationship with individual conduct in Omer Shahid Hamid's *The Prisoner* (2013).

Marxism, developed by Karl Marx, examines the relationship between social class, economic inequality, and power. It argues that unequal control over economic resources contributes to class conflict and the maintenance of existing social structures. Power, however, operates not only through force but also through ideology. From a Gramscian perspective, "power resides in ideology" (Woolcock 202), highlighting the role of ideological influence in maintaining

dominance. Louis Althusser further develops the Marxist understanding of ideology in his essay “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses”. He argues that ideology operates through institutions and practices that shape individuals’ beliefs and behaviour. As he explains, “An ideology always exists in an apparatus, and its practice, or practices. This existence is material” (Althusser 166). Ideology is therefore connected to the institutions and practices through which it operates. Martin Carnoy (1986) similarly discusses how ideology constitutes individuals as subjects and encourages them to recognize and behave according to the identities it establishes. He states, “Ideology recognizes individuals as subjects and subjects them to the “subject” of ideology itself guarantees that everything is “really” so, and that on the condition that the subjects recognize what they are and behave accordingly, everything will be all right” (Carnoy 92). This perspective is relevant to the present study because it provides a basis for examining how religious institutions and authority contribute to the formation of religious identities and influence individual conduct.

Michel Foucault also examines the relationship between power and subject formation, although his approach differs from Althusser’s. Rather than focusing primarily on ideology and state apparatuses, Foucault explores how power operates through everyday social relationships and shapes individual identities. He explains that power “applies itself to immediate everyday life which categorizes the individual, marks him by his own individuality, attaches him to his own identity. It is a form of power which makes individuals subjects” (Foucault 212). Although Foucault’s perspective offers another way of understanding the relationship between power and identity, the present study primarily draws on Althusser’s concepts of the religious ISA and interpellation.

Scholars have explored ideology and interpellation in literary and cultural texts, examining their role in shaping religious identities and ideological positions. The following studies address these concepts through religious practices, narratives, and film. Zammad and Talha, in their study “Ideological Positioning of the Islamic Fundamentalists and Moderates in *Khuda Kay Liye* (In the Name of God: A Pakistani Movie),” examine how characters express and reproduce different ideological positions through conversations and debates about Islam. Using qualitative analysis of selected film dialogues, the researchers explore the contrast between fundamentalist and moderate interpretations of religion. They identify Mullah Tahiri and Sheikh as representatives of fundamentalist positions, while Maulana Wali and Husain represent more moderate interpretations of Islamic teachings. The study also examines Western fundamentalism through the character of FBI supervisor Sheldon Grad. Drawing on Althusser’s ideas about ideology and the influence of

texts on audiences, the researchers discuss how dialogue and visual narratives can shape understandings of religious beliefs and social values. Their analysis highlights how competing ideological positions are expressed through characters' interactions and how different interpretations of religion influence attitudes towards music, women's freedom, and religious authority.

Alex Dubilet, in "A Political Theology of Interpellation: On Subjection, Individuation, and Becoming Nothing," examines the role of Christian religious ideology in Althusser's theory of interpellation. The essay explores how individuals become subjects through a process of recognition in which a transcendent call provides them with an identity, a place in the world, and a sense of freedom through obedience. Dubilet argues that interpellation does not simply recruit individuals into an existing ideological system but also contributes to the formation of their identities as subjects. The essay further examines how this process distinguishes between those who fit within established subject positions and those who do not. Through his discussion of the fourteenth-century mystic Meister Eckhart, Dubilet also considers the possibility of moving beyond these established forms of subjection through the concept of deinterpellation. His analysis highlights the relationship between religious ideology, obedience, and the formation of individual subjectivity.

Taylor Winfield (2023), in "Interpellative Styles: Choreographies of Identity Disruptions and Repairs," examines the relationship between interpellation and religious identity through ethnographic research with two Orthodox Jewish outreach organizations. The study explores how religious groups encourage individuals to adopt particular religious identities through interactions, communication, and religious practices. Winfield uses the concept of "interpellative styles" to examine how ideological beliefs are communicated and reinforced through practices that encourage individuals to recognize themselves within particular identities. The study also considers how individuals respond to these attempts at interpellation, showing that they may accept, resist, or fail to identify with the subject positions offered to them. This highlights the role of religious practices and social interactions in shaping identity, while also recognizing that individuals may respond differently to ideological expectations.

William Sherman (2023), in "Hailing and Hallowing: Persian Hagiographies, Interpellation, and Learning How to Read," examines how medieval Persian hagiographies can be used to understand Althusser's concept of interpellation. Using Rumi's anecdote "Moses and the Shepherd," the essay explores how hagiographical narratives construct not only the image of a saint within a particular historical and cultural context but also the audience that encounters these

narratives. It highlights how literary texts can shape readers' understanding of religious authority and encourage them to recognize themselves within particular ideological systems. The essay also considers how the study of Islamic hagiographies can help examine the formation of modern subjectivities and the ways individuals are interpellated through contemporary ideological systems. The essay thus highlights how religious narratives shape readers' understanding of religious authority and position them within particular ideological and social frameworks.

Shah, Rahman and Riaz in their study "The Application of Althusser's Theory of ISA in E. M. Forster's Novel *A Passage to India*," examine how political and religious ISA operate under British colonial rule. Their analysis of the political ISA focuses on how British colonial administrators use their authority and claims of cultural superiority to maintain control over Indians. Examples such as the Bridge Party, Major Callendar's treatment of Dr Aziz, Ronny Heaslop's attitudes towards Indians, and the trial of Dr Aziz illustrate the racial prejudice and unequal power relations reinforced by colonial institutions. The study also explores the religious ISA through the representation of Islam, Hinduism, and Christianity, examining how religious beliefs and practices shape characters' identities and relationships. The contrast between the Mosque and Temple chapters and the tensions between Muslim and Hindu characters highlight religious differences and divisions within Indian society. The study demonstrates how political and religious ideologies contribute to the maintenance of colonial authority and the reproduction of social hierarchies.

The reviewed studies establish the importance of ideology and interpellation in shaping religious identities, beliefs, and social relations across literary and cultural texts. However, they address different contexts, including competing interpretations of Islam, religious narratives, and British colonial rule. Building on this scholarship, the present study examines the role of religious ISA and interpellation in Omer Shahid Hamid's *The Prisoner* (2013), focusing on how religious authorities, institutions, and groups use religion to influence individual beliefs and behaviour. It also explores how religious ideology can be exploited to establish authority, secure obedience, manipulate followers, and justify militant violence. By examining the relationship between religious ideology, subject formation, and the exercise of power, the study extends existing scholarship to an underexplored aspect of contemporary Pakistani fiction.

The present study adopts a qualitative research design and uses textual analysis to examine Omer Shahid Hamid's *The Prisoner*. It examines how religious institutions, authority, and social practices in the novel transmit religious ideology and influence individual identities and actions. Drawing on Louis Althusser's concepts of ISAs and interpellation, the study analyzes how these

ideological processes operate within the power dynamics depicted in the novel. Catherine Belsey, in her essay “Textual Analysis as a Research Method” (2013), describes textual analysis as “a close encounter with the work itself, an examination of the details without bringing to them more suppositions than we can help” (160). Following this approach, the study closely examines selected passages and dialogues from the novel to explore how religious ideology is represented, how individuals are positioned within particular ideological beliefs, and how these representations contribute to the construction of meaning.

3. Theoretical Framework

Louis Althusser’s theory of ideology provides the main theoretical framework for this study. In his essay “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses” (1971), Althusser defines ideology as “a ‘Representation’ of the Imaginary Relationship of Individuals to their Real Conditions of Existence” (162). Ideology therefore shapes how individuals understand themselves, their social position, and the world around them. Althusser further argues that ideology is not limited to ideas or conscious beliefs but has a material existence in practices and institutions, as he states, “an ideology always exists in an apparatus, and its practice, or practices. This existence is material” (166). These practices allow ideology to become part of everyday life and contribute to the reproduction of existing social relations. Althusser argues that the ruling class maintains its ideological dominance through state apparatuses that reproduce the values and beliefs supporting the existing social order, as he explains, “the ideology of the ruling class does not become the ruling ideology by the grace of God, nor even by virtue of the seizure of State power alone. It is by the installation of the ideological state apparatuses in which this ideology is realized and realizes itself that it becomes the ruling ideology” (185). This understanding establishes the role of ISAs in reproducing and maintaining dominant ideology through social institutions and their practices.

Althusser distinguishes between the Repressive State Apparatuses (RSAs) and Ideological State Apparatuses (ISAs). The RSAs include institutions such as the government, police, army, courts, and prisons, while ISAs include institutions such as religion, education, the family, politics, communication, and culture. Althusser explains that the RSAs function “massively and predominantly by repression,” whereas the ISAs function “massively and predominantly by ideology” (149). He further describes ISAs as “a certain number of realities which present themselves to the immediate observer in the form of distinct and specialized institutions” (143). Through these institutions, dominant beliefs and values are transmitted and reproduced within society. Hence, ideology operates through practices and beliefs rather than relying on direct

coercion. This distinction allows the present study to focus on religious institutions and practices as ideological structures through which particular beliefs and values are transmitted and reproduced.

Among the ISAs identified by Althusser is the religious ISA, which he describes as “the system of the different Churches” (143). Religious institutions can therefore function as sites where beliefs, values, moral principles, and forms of behaviour are transmitted and reproduced. Religious discourse can shape ideas of right and wrong, duty, obedience, and acceptable conduct by presenting particular beliefs as legitimate or morally necessary. In this way, religion can contribute to the formation of individuals within specific ideological positions. For the present study, the concept of the religious ISA provides a basis for examining how religious authority, madrassahs, and militant groups in *The Prisoner* contribute to the transmission and reproduction of particular religious beliefs and values.

The process through which these beliefs shape individuals can be understood through Althusser’s concept of interpellation, which explains how ideology constitutes individuals as subjects. Althusser states that “All ideology hails or interpellates concrete individuals as concrete subjects, by the functioning of the category of the subject” (173). He illustrates this process through the example of a police officer calling out, “Hey, you there!” (174). When an individual recognizes the call as directed at them and responds, they identify themselves with the position implied by the call. Similarly, individuals may recognize themselves within particular religious identities and accept the beliefs, duties, and behaviours associated with them. Althusser further explains that “the existence of ideology and the hailing or interpellation of individuals as subjects are one and the same thing” (175). Interpellation therefore shapes not only individuals’ beliefs but also their understanding of themselves and their actions. Individuals living within ideology generally do not recognize themselves as ideological subjects because ideology presents their beliefs and practices as natural rather than ideological (Althusser 175). In this way, ideology influences how people understand their identities and their place within society. These concepts provide a basis for examining how *The Prisoner* portrays the formation of religious subjects and the influence of religious ideology on their identities, attitudes, and actions.

4. Discussion and Analysis

In *The Prisoner*, Omar Shahid Hamid illustrates how the religious ISA is manipulated through characters like Qari Saif and Sheikh Noman, who leverage religious authority for self-serving motives. Before assuming the role of a pious leader, Qari Saif was “...a pimp selling

women in the bazaars of Peshawar!"; a past he deliberately conceals behind a devout façade (324). Upon encountering Akbar at Sheikh Noman's mosque complex during the search for the kidnapped American journalist, Qari Saif, mistaking Akbar for a religious scholar based on repute, interrogates Akbar's commitment to faith and devotion to Allah's cause, observing, "There are so many imposters in our religion, it is hard to decipher whose message is the true one" (321). Akbar immediately recognizes the stark contradiction, fully conscious of Qari Saif's previous life as a pimp in Peshawar. This exchange highlights the hypocrisy inherent in self-appointed religious figures who project moral superiority, criticize others, and assert righteous authority while disregarding their own deeply compromised backgrounds.

During their encounter, Qari Saif forcefully maintains that "The American unbeliever must be executed" and asserts that "It is the will of God!" (322). Sheikh Noman subsequently reveals to Akbar in private that Qari Saif has successfully persuaded the majority of his followers that executing the hostage is a holy act that carries divine approval and moral virtue. He says:

He has been pushing me to kill the American. What's worse is that he has convinced most of my other supporters that this is a good thing to do. They have all been carried away with his fiery rhetoric and his stories of fighting in the jihad. (325)

This dynamic demonstrates the ease with which individuals are interpellated into accepting and enacting radical doctrines when directed by figures of authority, as Althusser posits that ISAs function primarily through ideology (1971, 145). Consequently, the worldviews propagated by those in authority, especially within religious spheres, are internalized by ordinary believers, guiding their conduct and worldview without question. In societies like Pakistan, where faith fundamentally shapes identity and societal norms, appealing to religious sentiment becomes particularly effective. Reflecting on this susceptibility, Noman remarks, "They [common people] just want to follow any idiot who starts shouting "Death to America" (325). Extremist factions advance an ideological stance asserting that non-Muslims possess no right to exist, framing the elimination of non-believers as divine mandate and deploying sacred texts to legitimize violence while serving their own agendas. They instill in the minds of ordinary people the belief that Americans, 'the unbelievers', want to destroy them. By spreading fear and hatred, they manipulate the masses into seeing others as enemies, propagating constant threat and division. This process directly reflects how the religious ISA operates to shape and regulate individual subjectivity. By reinforcing these doctrines, religious authorities maintain control over their followers and foster a collective consciousness that legitimizes conflict. Religious leaders like Qari Saif want to maintain firm control over their adherents by continuously disseminating their specific interpretations of

faith. To preserve their authority, these leaders discourage their followers from engaging in theological discussions with others. By restricting exposure to alternative perspectives, they prevent critical debate and ensure that their followers remain committed strictly to their ideological worldview. This becomes evident in the novel when Qari Saif himself says, "... I don't want my followers getting confused and corrupted by anyone else's views, especially a kafir. I have to keep them focused on our mission" (331).

Examining Sheikh Noman's background reveals that the self-proclaimed religious leader, previously known as Nomi, was a fraudster "...who used to cheat people by creating fake religious charities now calls himself a sheikh" after transitioning into the lucrative enterprise of religious education (153). He illegally occupies land to establish madrassahs under the pretext of providing religious education to children, although his intentions are entirely self-serving. These madrassahs were deliberately built directly adjacent to Sheikh Noman's gambling dens, exposing the hypocrisy behind his image of piety. This character also reveals the exploitation of religion for personal gains. Sheikh Noman leverages the reverence for religious figures within Pakistani society to acquire wealth and build a loyal following. By presenting himself as a spiritual guide, he garners dedicated supporters who view him as a righteous leader, completely unaware of his criminal activities. This blind allegiance stems from the cultural and ideological conditioning that places religious figures above scrutiny, enabling Sheikh Noman to conceal his corrupt activities behind a religious facade. Commenting on this dynamic, Akbar observes, "Respectability is just one step removed from outright criminality," illustrating how ideologies and appearances disguise unlawful conduct and demonstrating that social respectability often functions as a cover for criminal behavior (153). Akbar describes Noman as:

He wears fine clothes, dabs his body with expensive perfume when just a few years ago he didn't know the difference between a bar of soap and a biscuit, and is now acknowledged as a scholar of Islam. And all of this in such a short span of time. (153)

This example demonstrates how an individual can capitalize on the social esteem granted to religious authority to acquire power, material wealth, and influence, despite engaging in behavior that directly contradicts the ethical principles they publicly profess.

Noman's facade as a reputable religious figure helps him gain a number of staunch supporters. Moreover, the strategy of building these madrassahs next to his gambling dens works brilliantly for him as:

Every time the police tried to raid one of his dens, the poor, unassuming madrassahs students would be told that their seminary was being attacked, and they would rally vociferously to defend the premises. The police facing mob would naturally back off. (289)

This incident reflects how the strategic manipulation of religious sentiment acts as a shield for organized criminal enterprises. By misrepresenting law enforcement actions as attacks on the madrassah, the figure of authority relies on the impressionable nature and unquestioning obedience of the students to protect his illegal operations. The students, convinced that they are defending their faith and religious institution, become unwitting tools in shielding his criminal activities. This allows him to operate his criminal enterprises without fear of accountability which benefits him even more as:

The sheikh's remote- control mobs had given him quite a bit of leverage over the city administration and the police, leverage that he would then use to garner further benefits for himself. A fine plot of land here, an extra bodyguard there. (289)

Consequently, this dynamic highlights how the Sheikh's calculated control over his followers provides him with substantial leverage over the city administration and law enforcement agencies. By mobilizing his "remote-control mobs" to create pressure, he secures favors such as land and personal protection, further consolidating his power. This also demonstrates ISA of religion, as the sanctity associated with religious institutions leaves law enforcement institutions helpless, making them hesitant to act for fear of public backlash or accusations of targeting religion.

Religious ISA, as described by Althusser, include institutions that interpellate individuals into roles that support and reinforce dominant religious ideologies. Althusser writes in the ISA essay, "Ideology interpellates individuals as subjects" (170). "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 (it transforms them all) by that very precise operation which I have called *interpellation* or hailing" (Althusser 174). As in the novel, individuals like Noman run religious institutions such as madrassahs to propagate their ideological beliefs, shaping the minds of their followers and reinforcing their control over the community by framing their ideology as both righteous and necessary. Sheikh Noman manipulates his madrassah students by instilling in them the belief that they are defending their faith and seminary from external threats, using them as shields to protect his gambling dens from police raids. These students, unaware of his ulterior motives, blindly follow his directives, believing they are serving a greater religious cause. Similarly, Qari Saif, a former sex trafficker, rebrands himself as a religious authority and commands a loyal following. His followers accept his ideology that unbelievers must be eradicated

to fulfill the will of God. This blind loyalty enables Saif to maintain his power and control, despite his criminal activities. The novel also portrays how individuals are drawn into jihadi ideologies, where they are indoctrinated to believe that acts of violence, such as executing unbelievers, are divine commands. This process of interpellation ensures that these individuals view themselves as righteous defenders of their faith, while in reality; they are pawns advancing the agendas of manipulative leaders. By exposing how religious ideology is used to justify and perpetuate violence, the novel critiques the exploitation of faith as a tool for control and the propagation of systemic power structures.

The influence of religious interpellation extends beyond the formation of individual beliefs and identities to wider conflicts involving militant groups and state institutions. The kidnapping of Jon Friedland, an American journalist, in *The Prisoner* illustrates how religious ideology and state power influence individual and institutional actions. The jihadis seek to kill Friedland because they view him as an unbeliever and believe his execution would fulfil the will of God. Their plan to record the execution also serves as a means of sending a political message to America. Meanwhile, the government, intelligence agencies, and police work to secure his release, partly because of pressure from the American government. As Akbar remarks, "... President sahib is definitely going to have to explain to his mai-baap, the American president, how he allowed an American to get killed in Pakistan" (144). This concern highlights the influence of diplomatic relations and the state's international reputation on official decisions. The incident thus presents two competing uses of ideological power: the jihadis invoke religious beliefs to justify violence, while state authorities respond to political and diplomatic pressures. Through this contrast, the novel shows how religious ideology can be used to justify militant actions and how state institutions make decisions shaped by the interests they seek to protect.

5. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, *The Prisoner* demonstrates how religious ideology shapes individual beliefs, identities, and behaviour. Through its portrayal of religious authority, madrassahs, and militant groups, the novel illustrates how religious ideology shapes individuals' understanding of faith, duty, and obedience. Althusser's concept of ISAs provides a framework for examining how religious beliefs are transmitted and reinforced through institutions and social practices. The concept of interpellation further explains how individuals come to recognize themselves within particular religious identities and adopt the beliefs and expectations associated with them. The novel's portrayal of militant groups and religiously motivated violence highlights the

consequences of ideological subject formation when particular beliefs are used to justify violent actions. At the same time, the connections between religious ideology and political interests reveal how religious authority can intersect with wider structures of power. Through an Althusserian reading, *The Prisoner* shows that religious ideology operates not only at the level of personal belief but also influences individual conduct and collective action. Ultimately, the novel offers a critical perspective on the relationship between religious ideology, power and interpellation in contemporary Pakistani society.

Recommendations

Future research can build upon this analysis by applying Louis Althusser's concepts of ISAs and interpellation, specifically focusing on religious ISAs, to other works of Pakistani crime and detective fiction. Expanding this focus could clarify how religious authority, ideological messaging, and subject formation function across varying historical moments, political landscapes, and literary forms. A comparative approach examining *The Prisoner* alongside other South Asian or postcolonial detective novels would offer deeper insight into how religious ideology and institutional authority are framed across distinct social contexts. Furthermore, investigating contemporary Pakistani literature that addresses extremism, faith-based radicalization, and religious discourse can highlight how these forces continue to position individuals within ideological frameworks. Pursuing these avenues will enrich scholarship on Pakistani Anglophone literature while expanding our understanding of how contemporary fiction exposes, interprets, and critiques the religious structures governing individual subjectivity.

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