

Margaret Mitchell's *Gone with the Wind*: Women's Historical Novel

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Abstract:

History has been the tool of patriarchy to establish and perpetuate its hegemonic hold on society by presenting the male narratives and marginalizing, often excluding, female and minoritarian perspectives and experiences. War history, likewise, has been the record of victories and failures of men. It seeks to idealize the figure of 'war-hero' who for the sake of nation or community had abjured personal desires and comfort and devoted himself to one goal alone, that is to protect and serve his country. Margaret Mitchell employs one such war, namely the American Civil War (1861-65) as the backdrop of her famous novel *Gone with the Wind* (1936) presenting itself to be the narrative of popular romantic story and attempts to foreground the history of female experience that is excluded from the official records of public history. This paper, therefore, intends to show how in spite of set against the backdrop of a war history the novel, that is chiefly dominated by female characters, does not engage in idealizing a male narrative rather brings to the fore the story of a changed nation traced through the female struggle. Mitchell shows how before the birth of any prominent feminist movement the domestic life of America that was ravaged by the Civil War was not protected and run by any 'hero', rather by women chiefly. This thesis, thereby, intends to explore how the domestic life, which is relegated at the back in any history of war, is chiefly handled and brought to normalcy by the women of the society and how the women being desperate and instrumental, became the entrepreneur in time of need and though not given any praise became the shaping force of the new social order as the nurturer, much unacknowledged even by themselves and the two manifestation of the spirit of women which is pushed to the margin in the male narrative of war. This thesis will bring into account the critical perspectives of Dianna Wallace, Linda Hutcheon, Jean-Francois Lyotard and Gerda Lerner in order to establish how Mitchell's novel present a counter narrative through its appropriation of patriarchal hegemonic historical meta-narrative.

Keywords: patriarchal hegemony, reconstruction of history, feminism, intersection.

INTRODUCTION

History was among those disciplines which were believed to present 'objective truth' based on facts; the knowledge it produced was assumed to be 'true' and 'unbiased'. With the coming of the twentieth century this 'truth' of history came under critical analysis. More prominently in the late twentieth century critics like Lyotard and Foucault questioned and proved that history is not and cannot be as objective and unbiased as it was thought to be. With the Modernist movement in art and literature itself various given norms were being questioned and in the Postmodern aesthetics the autonomy of such norms were thwarted. 'Postmodernism', as Lyotard calls it, is 'incredulity towards the meta-narrative', and History was among such meta-narratives that were proved to be subjective, depending upon the socio-political, cultural and ideological beliefs of the historian and hence constructed. History as a meta-narrative produces its own language game and legitimizes it. The traditional History was mainly the written records of European male achievements and failures; and it was a tool to exercise and establish the ideologies of the hegemony. It was the instrument of power through which knowledge was politicized and internalized by the mass. To use Foucauldian term it was that internal 'tool' that helped to control and thereby to

strengthen the mechanisms and relationship of power and production of knowledge. The traditional History, therefore, excluded whatever that could threaten its claim on power. It, thereby, silenced experiences of various minoritarian perspectives. As History was itself proved to be subjective and constructed the knowledge it produced, nevertheless, was as much constructed and partial. This knowledge failed to accommodate various voices and perspectives that the traditional European patriarchal society silenced. Postmodernism, therefore, becomes a liberating experiences for these minoritarian and vernacular voices. With the fragmentation of the meta-narratives various micro-narratives found a way to express their own experiences and perspectives.

In the Postmodern aesthetics History is not made obsolete, rather it shows an ironic rethinking of history and the past. Unlike the Modernist movement, there is no sign of nostalgic longing for the past in Postmodernism. It, rather, problematises, installs and subverts. Though it questions various master narratives, it does not deny them; Postmodernism only interrogates into the fabrics of those master-narratives, their relation to experience, without any assurance of closure. If the center, the master-narratives, is seen as human construct and a fiction, not a fixed and unchangeable reality, then new possibilities of multiplicity and difference come into existence. The heterogeneous identity Postmodernism posits is not the hierarchical 'otherness', the binary opposition and exclusion; rather these are differences without any preference, which are multiple, plural and provisional. As the center is recognized as a fiction- though necessary, but a fiction nevertheless- then the non-totalizing identities, voices and experiences are reasserted. From this decentered perspective the 'ex-centric' in Hutcheon's word- the marginal, the local, the regional- is invested with renewed significance in the face of the realization that no culture is homogeneous or monolith (Hutcheon, 12). When all the totalizing universalisations start to self-deconstruct, then the complexity of the contradiction within conventions begin to be apparent. The heterogeneity that is asserted in the face of the totalizing master-narratives does not take the form of many fixed individual subjects, but instead is conceived of as a flux of contextualized identities as Hutcheon says. Black and feminist theory has been particularly important in the Postmodern refocusing of historicity. They do not form monolithic movements, but constitute a multiplicity of responses to a commonly perceived situation of marginality and 'ex-centricity'. They also link racial and/or gender differences to questions of discourses of authority and power that are at the heart of the Postmodern enterprise. These theories merge the domain of theory and social praxis. Women have helped to develop the Postmodern valuing of the margins and the 'ex-centric' as a way out of the power problematic of centers and of male/female oppositions.

HISTORICAL NOVEL PRESENTING A COUNTER NARRATIVE OF HISTORY

The domain of literature though considered as presenting 'fiction', but, nevertheless, is rooted firmly in the context from which a text is born. Though literary fiction apparently is seen as apolitical and imaginative but as Postmodern aesthetics shows in the matrix of every text lies relations of power that is politicized and problematic. A literary fiction, therefore, is a text that presents the cultural oeuvre, aesthetic orientation and political ideologies of the particular context.

Before the emergence of Postmodern aesthetics writers chose the medium of literature to give voice to the silences of official recorded History. With the free flow of imagination the author can invest life to that portion of population of a nation that is often neglected and silenced by the hegemonic power. The historical novel, according to M. H. Abrams, "takes its setting and some characters and events from history, but makes the historical events and issues crucial for the central characters...and for the course of the narrative. Some of the greatest historical novels also use the protagonists and actions to reveal what the author regards as the deep forces of that impel the historical process" (Abrams, 256). History was considered to be dealing with particulars and fiction with the universal. The historical novel deals with particular, but this particular becomes the universal on account of human truth (Goodman, 510). In some

respects the novel may be truer than history as it recreates the spirit of the time subjectively. It is not merely concerned with the historical specificities precise chronological details rather it aims “to enshrine the vision of history by showing the soul of man both in its lofty and humble aspects” (Goodman. 511). It is for this reason that an intimate knowledge of the domestic history of a nation, to be obtained from historical fiction, can alone lead to the prognosis of political events.

The historical novel most prominently began with Sir Walter Scott’s Waverly novels which presents “the specifically historical, that is, derivation of the individuality of characters from the historical peculiarity of their age” (Lukacs, 19) which was found lacking in the historical novel before Scott. The French Revolution and the consequent rise and fall of Napoleon made history in Europe a mass experience for the first time. Mingled with this the Enlightenment movement made history an integral part for providing the principles that would form a “reasonable” society and state, and to distinguish the unreasonable and feudal from the reasonable and bourgeois. These developments broadens the horizons of the mass and allows them to comprehend their lives as something which is historically conditioned and realize that history affects their daily course and concerns them immediately. The Napoleonic war created a sense of nationhood, national identity and history. As Lukacs argues the appeal to national independence and national character is necessarily connected with a re-awakening of national history, with memories of past, of past greatness, of moments of national dishonor, whether this results in a progressive or reactionary ideology (Lukacs,25). In the mass experience of history, therefore, the national element is linked with problems of social transformation on one hand, and on the other people’s increasing awareness of the connection between national and world history. Coupled with this grew another awareness of the ruthless force of Capitalism where the small is destroyed by the big, where cultures are debased by transforming all into commodities. Historical forces, thereby, becomes the shaping power of progress of society as well as individuals. These formed the basis of Scott’s historical novel. Through his historical novels Scott presents not only his perspective on the conception of English history but also on its future development. For his novels Scott does not choose any heroic hero, rather a more or less mediocre, average English gentleman. By choosing such heroes Scott shows how he wants to trace a middle way between the extremes, and endeavors to demonstrate artistically the historical reality of this way by means of his portrayal of the great crisis in English history (Lukacs, 33). This tradition of Scott can be seen continuing in English writers like Dickens’s Tale of Two Cities, George Eliot’s Romola and so on. The historical novel took on new significance with the emergence of Postmodernism. As the very concept and the truth of History is being questioned and problematised. The postmodernist historical novel further brings into question the distinct division between history and fiction. With the introduction of Postmodern aesthetics history has proved to be more literary and literature more historicized. The Postmodern historical fiction more than ever foregrounds the hitherto silenced histories of minoritarian and marginalized groups by subverting, questioning and problematising the autonomy of historical truths and facts through the fiction. It, therefore, denies the empirical concepts of history on which traditional historical novels were based. In this connection feminist and postcolonial theory becomes more prominent as both of these brings to the fore the silenced groups of women and colonized people which has been hitherto marginalized and overlooked by the traditional hegemonic patriarchal social system. The historiographic metafiction, as Hutcheon calls the historical novels of the Postmodern time, foregrounds such disturbing questions which bring the normative traditions under critical analysis and reveals the embedded faultlines of the traditional systems. This historiographic metafiction writes alternative versions of the accepted and existing history. It presents the potentiality of multiple historical possibilities in contrast to the unilinear historical versions sustained through suppression and exclusion. It challenges and attempts to subvert logocentrism, phallogentrism, ethnocentrism and imperialism of Western dominant ideology.

WOMEN'S HISTORICAL NOVEL

In the genre of historical novel there are very few women authors with notable success. In eighteenth century apart from George Eliot's *Romola* there is a little mention of successful women historical novel. Diana Wallace notes that historical novel has been a popular genre among both women readers and writers (Wallace, IX). But in spite of being popular little critical attention has been invested upon this genre. There is tendency to associate women's historical novel with romance and thus to stigmatize it as escapism. This phenomenon of excluding women's historical novel from the domain of serious historical novels can indicate two possible conclusions. Firstly, it can be concluded that women citizen of the populace of the state lacked that historical consciousness and sense of national identity due to their minimum participation in the political matters of the nation. Or, secondly, it can be derived that recorded History excluded and further erased the maternal genealogy. Gerda Lerner, however, argues that women half of national populace has been as much instrumental in preserving the national heritage and traditions and thereby connecting the past with the future through the collective memory (*The Creation of Patriarchy*, 4). Women are not marginal in the making of the civilization but however they are excluded from the official recorded and interpreted past. This indicates, according to Lerner, the complicated and problematic relation women share with that official hegemonic History. The consciousness of women of their history that has been silenced and excluded from the hegemonic History becomes an important part in the path of women's emancipation. Women have been systematically excluded from the enterprise of creating symbol system and interpreting either their own history or that of men; "this tension between women's actual historical experience and their exclusion from interpreting that experience [is] called 'the dialectics of women'" by Lerner (Lerner, 5). This dialectical force of women can be traced very subtly through the women historical novels.

The popularity of historical novel among both women readers and writers, therefore, shows that women look up to this domain of literary genre as a discourse within which women can be made central. Women's historical novel, thereby, can offer a feminized history which imaginatively returns the girl-child to her place within a maternal genealogy, and thus to re-unit with the mother; through cross-reading and cross-writing, they have allowed the women access to the male domains of history-politics, warfare and adventure- as well (Wallace, X). From the birth of patriarchal social system women have been seen as the 'other', the mirror image of the male participants in society. The Enlightenment movement that became instrumental in giving birth to the historical consciousness excluded and stigmatized women as unreasonable creatures who are in need of male surveillance to behave as per the normative social system. The hysteric history of women is what the Feminist thinkers attempt to give voice to and counter the phallogocentrism. They argue that as dominant culture privileges male experiences through phallogocentrism, history as a meta-narrative of that hegemonic system has always been the discourse of 'his story'. History, therefore, needs to be questioned and deconstructed from the Feminist perspective. With the help of Postmodern aesthetics Feminist thinkers challenges the monology of the meta-narratives by its plurality of voices. Gynocriticism according to Elaine Showalter is one of the most important instruments in the domain of literature to foreground the exclusive experiences of women through forming distinct paradigms for the analysis of women writings (*Towards a Feminist Poetics*, 4). Women historical novel in this connection, therefore, assumes an important role in the development of the dialectics of women through literature.

Knowledge of history has the potentiality to be dangerously subversive for which historical novel has often been a political tool in the hands of women writers to give voice and critique such subjects which would otherwise been considered as taboo in their contemporary time. The lack of records, the inappropriateness of standard periodisation and chronology and the focus on public events posit problems in writing history of women that encompass their entire experiences in the traditional way (Wallace, 2). It is, therefore, through the literary genre of historical novel women trace and form the consciousness of history which is exclusively of women. The escapism that is associated with women historical novel indicates the dissatisfaction of women writers, though

unknowingly, with solemn male history. It, therefore, becomes a form of resistance through rejection. Their dissatisfaction shows their latent knowledge that recorded history is the result of selection, presentations and even falsification based on particular ideologies and perspectives. This knowledge of marginality and exclusion in turn given birth to a skepticism which breeds resistance among readers. The exclusive nature of history results in the inclusiveness of women historical novels that allow them the imaginative space to construct their history. This genre, therefore, becomes a tool of political intervention in the male domain of history through women authors. This genre has been hybridized in the hands of women writers, overlapping with romance, fantasy, gothic, the adventure story and the detective novel (Wallace, 3). The model of serious historical novel which was developed by Scott itself excludes various forms of women historical novels that even predate his own writings. The exclusion of women historical novels indicate to the politics of canon formation that marginalizes women even in literary field conforming to patriarchal hegemonic ideology. The exclusion of women from participating directly into public sphere and thus to political events has formed the consciousness of history male oriented; therefore labeling women historical novel as not being solemn shows how a masculine literary tradition is formed.

Women historical novel, nevertheless, encompasses both the popular and serious literary trends. But these two domains are interlinked as the popular literary trend gives a direct voice and becomes a mirror of the contemporary collective imagination and consciousness without subtle critique, mostly. It can either oppose the hegemonic ideology in a direct manner, or confirm to it; but, nevertheless, it is an imaginative response to the collective consciousness. The serious literary trend does the same with very subtle critical complexities and problematises the case in hand. The domain of historical novel, however, has provided the women writers a license to critique various social issues that are labeled as taboos in heteronormative social system. This is most prominently seen in the handling of issues of sexuality which has allowed to voice sexual orientation deviating from heterosexuality, childbirth, contraception, abortion and so on. The female sexuality that is denied in the traditional patriarchal society, thereby, finds a vent in the women historical novels. According to Wallace the main reasons for the preoccupation of women writers with the genre of historical novel can be the fact that a temporal viewpoint allows to see the gender itself as historically contingent rather than essential (Wallace, 8). Another derogatory term that has often been invested on women historical novel is ‘costume novel’ to distinguish the popular novel which generally attempts to employ the period setting only as a decorative background from the serious historical novel (Wallace, 21). The clothing that are described in those novels were probably uncomfortable and constraining to wear but can be glamorous and sensual in the imagination. This has twofold meanings. Apparently it indicates that how through fashion women’s free movements were restrained; by engaging women in an invisible race to look more fashionable they were further relegated into realm of domesticity and were considered vain and foolish. But the employment of such fashionable clothes and accessories to catch a more suitable and handsome husband shows how much a patriarchal construct it was. On the other hand, the word ‘costume’ also implies that how gender roles were more of a performative construct than a biological law of nature. Women historical novel, therefore, becomes an important indicator in foregrounding the subtle nuances and complex politics in the formation of women subculture under the meta-narrative of hegemonic patriarchal ideology, which did not come into critical consideration until the advent of Postmodern aesthetics and prominent Feminist movements both in theory and practice.

GONE WITH THE WIND – APPROPRIATING PATRIARCHY BY PRESENTING A COUNTER NARRATIVE

Margaret Mitchell’s *Gone with the Wind* is one of those historical novels that are labeled as belonging to the popular literary genre. Though the novel is written in 1936, before the birth of Postmodernism or any prominent Feminist movement, but it is a well documentation of how the role of women is integral in shaping and preserving the social system. In spite of being labeled as a popular romance it shows the history of maternal genealogy traced through a family saga set against the backdrop of American Civil War. War history is among those political domains which are considered to be male oriented, thereby

excluding the experiences of women. Mitchell does not document the history of the war front, rather she chose as theme of her novel the domestic sphere of the society which is relegated at the back in any war history. Through the perspective of women she foregrounds the social change that The Civil War brought as its consequence. Her novel is historical not just because it uses a historical event as its setting, but it has those distinct features of a women historical novel, i.e., it traces the historical consciousness and the survival spirit of women at its nascent stage and the social condemnation that they face for this.

Gone with the Wind records the love story of its beautiful heroine Scarlett O'Hara and Rhett Butler, both of whom are unconventional and condemned by the society. It focuses on the Southern America and the lives of white rich plantation women. In a sense it is a flawed narrative as it excludes the experiences of black women and their slavery. It can be said that it is narrow as in stead of critiquing and including the variety of experiences of women both white and black, it only records the story of white upper class women; but, nevertheless, it is a well documentation of the emergence of new roles of women vis-à-vis changing social system. Mitchell sets her story in the north of Georgia and the new Atlanta and the plantation owners of those places. Those are a conglomeration of immigrants coming not only from various parts of the South of America, but also from Europe- Gerald O'Hara, Scarlett's father, moved to Georgia from Ireland, and her mother Ellen belonged to a French family who had immigrated to America. The main economic dependence of the people of Georgia was the cotton plantations that are owned by their family. Because of the good business the cotton plantations offered the owners had money and therefore had various means to spend their money and time before the Civil War. One of the most important fact that Mitchell shows through the women characters of plantation women before the Civil War is their roles in running the plantation. Characters like Ellen, Mrs. Tarleton, and old Miss Fontaine are the pillars on whom their plantations stand but in spite of that their contribution is much unacknowledged and romanticized. Ellen is seen as the ideal woman who sacrificed her love for the pride of her family, invested her entire life for the nurturance and preservation of her husband, his business and her children without ever complaining. Judged against this idealized selfless dedicative nature of her mother, Scarlett appears to be more the child of Gerald than Ellen's daughter, and she finds her way to lady hood fraught with hurdles. This emphasizes the traditional patriarchal nature of the pre war society of north of Southern America which privileged the normative gender roles. These social norms face a severe challenge in the post War situation where the nostalgia of the ideal pre War days posits obstacles to survive and adjust to the new order.

Another important factor that Mitchell shows is the economic dependence of the Southern people on cotton plantation as their main source. This business of cotton also faced severe challenges during and after the War, as the North was financially developed because of its industrial developments. Another aspect from which the South differed from the North is the attitude towards education. In the North much emphasis was given to public education, though women education was more neglected compared to that of male education. The South because of the miscellaneous culture of immigrants depended mainly on European model of education. Though boys were educated in mathematics, literature, history, science and so on, as we see in case Ashley Wilkes, women education focused mainly on domestic courses. Whereas Ashley Wilkes has a strong knowledge of literature but Scarlett's education under the care of Ellen and Mammy is focused mainly on how to be a proper lady and catch a good husband. The aspect of education becomes important when facing the consequences of War. Tarleton boys though had the opportunity to go to the University of Georgia but were expelled from there, and had no shame and guilt about it. But Scarlett's capacity to calculate faster than many men helps her in her lumber business. Her primary knowledge of mathematics and her practical sense is pitted against Ashley's intellectual knowledge. Though being a woman Scarlett's education is much neglected on one hand, and her affinity for business rather is condemned as being unbecoming of a proper lady on the other, but this is the fundamental spirit based on which she herself not only survives but also provides for her family. Ashley though educated and intellectual lacks this spirit for which in spite of his education he has to depend on Scarlett's charity. This subtly shows how women become the main source of nurturance not only in domestic sphere but also financially. In the post War situation it is the women who first start business but interestingly they do not

acknowledge their contribution to the adjustment and building of new social system. They see their business as only a means which they need to accept until their men are able to provide for them. Both women and men are nostalgic about the bygone days, but somehow women are the first to pick themselves up and provide for their family so that their men can still bask in the nostalgic glory of the past. Scarlett's tremendous spirit and interest in her lumber business is only a bare and unabashed manifestation of this survival spirit. The societal condemnation that she faces for her attitude reveals the hypocritical nature of the patriarchal society through which women are denied the consciousness of their role historical process of social changes.

Scarlett's ambitious nature faces direct opposition to the socially constructed ideal women. As the South followed Europe as their model, the ideal figure of woman was much similar to that of Europe. She was considered to be submissive, weak in disposition, lacking knowledge about the male spheres, which are politics and financial matters. She was supposed to find her happiness in the domestic sphere of husband and children. Scarlett and other women characters apparently match this idealized construct. When the Tarleton boys attempts to talk about the ensuing War to Scarlett she gets bored which in turn enhances their interest in her. But interestingly she gets bored not because of the matter of discussion being political, but because the attention was shifting from her to the War. This also hints at Scarlett's self-centered nature which a woman is not supposed to have. An unmarried woman's sole work was supposed to attract a handsome husband by flaunting their physical beauty and elaborate fashionable clothes and accessories. This again Scarlett's was seen to do at the beginning of the novel. Though she is not very beautiful but she is very attractive, as Mitchell describes, and is able to be the center of attraction in the estate. She is preoccupied to adapt to the latest fashion trends on one hand and to win Ashley Wilkes as her husband on the other. And when she fails in the later she hurriedly marries Charles Hamilton and soon gives birth to their son Wade.

Women's lives were moreover neither happy nor easy, but they had to accept it as it is, as it is a male world. This acceptance is manifested through almost every women character. At one point of time they accept that they are not happy with their lot but soon enough they also accept it. Ellen O'Hara for example presents these, she becomes the idealized construct of women figure. She is denied the proper acknowledgment that she deserves, and it is only after her death with her absence the importance of her presence is shown. Melanie Wilkes on the other hand is another manifestation of the ideal women. She becomes the foil of Scarlett because of her tender, loving, innocent and sacrificing nature. She is happy to fulfill the ultimate destiny of a woman, that of being a wife and mother. As opposed to this Scarlett sees marriage almost as means to survive in the antagonistic social situation. Rather than seeing marriage as sacrosanct, her approach to it is almost business like. She marries Frank Kennedy, though he was suppose to marry her sister, because of his money in business and the prospects he holds in saving Tara being sold out. She even cannot entirely accept her son Wade; thereby both debunking the traditional role of women as a wife and mother. She, therefore, becomes a crude manifestation of spirit of women that cannot be silenced by the patriarchal social norm. She accepts the norms only to subvert it accordingly her own wish. The fashionable costumes she wear becomes her tool to attract male attention, she, thereby, plays with male of the society. But when engaged in the cotton field she leaves them for her physical convenience, and again puts them on to impress Rhett Butler when in need of money. Her constant shift of costume, as seen in women historical novel, emphasizes that the gender role that women were supposed to imbibe are nothing but a normative performance and it can easily be subverted.

Mitchell, therefore, through her various women characters shows on one hand how the normative traditional patriarchal society induced women to act and react, and thereby silencing their own ambitions, desires and even inherent nature. This patriarchal construction was preserved not only by the male of the society but as much by the women as well. On the other hand Mitchell traces the developing spirit which struggles to foreground the voice that has been long silenced and denied by subverting the norms. The maternal genealogy that women historical novels trace is also found in the novel through the various plurality of experiences of women. Through documenting not only the life of Scarlett, but also of Ellen, old Miss Fontaine, Mrs. Tarleton, O'Hara sisters, Aunt Pitty, Melanie with as much attention and

compassion, Mitchell brings to the fore the history of women subculture that did not find any free expression and the spirit of women that were not channelized in a proper developmental and emancipatory path. Scarlett's direct resistance to those patriarchal norms shows how a new consciousness of women is emerging in the backdrop of Civil War. This new consciousness of the spirit of woman is as much able and instrumental in both domestic and public or political sphere. This consciousness is that dialectical force of women which reveals the faultlines beneath the seemingly coherent social order and which denies women's role in the historical process of social change and making. Very subtly Mitchell's novel through the love story of Scarlett and Rhett challenges the meta-narrative of patriarchy and foregrounds the micro-narrative of women subculture.

CONCLUSION

Margaret Mitchell's *Gone with the Wind*, therefore, becomes a successful manifestation of women historical novel. It merges the genre of popular and serious historical novel as it both gives voice to popular collective imagination and subtly criticizes the social order. It appropriates the patriarchal construction of idealized women figure by accepting it only to subvert it later through the beautiful yet unconventional heroine Scarlett. Her assertion in any antagonistic situation "tomorrow is a new day" reveals the hope that the spirit of the new born consciousness of women bear at the face of marginalization, that if not today but sooner or later it will find a proper expression and will deconstruct the hegemonic ideology.

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