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Table of contents

	Pages
SILUE Ténéna Mamadou, Thatcherism and Family Strife in Jonathan Coe's <i>What a Carve UP!</i>	p.1
Tchinele D. Joseph Sévérant , Deconstrucción del Ilusionismo Moderno/Occidental en <i>Akon y Belinga de Inongo-Vi-Makomè</i>	p.11
El Hadji Omar THIAM, Alienacão e Afirmação : Un Olhar Comparativo Sobre a Personagem <i>Mulata Nos Romances o Mulato</i> de Aluisio de Azevedo e Nini, <i>Mulâtresse</i> du Sénégal de Abdoulaye Sadjì	p.22
Cyriaque Akomo-Zoghe, De Los Fang a Los Afrocolombianos : Una Aproximación a La Representación Mitológica De La Muerte	p.31
A. Mia Élise ADJOURMANI, Regards croisés sur l'esclavage : récits testimoniaux Africain Américain et Africain francophone	p.44
Demgne Isabelle Valérie "L'éprouver" dans <i>Isabelle</i> d'André Gide	p.56
Nicolas Balutet, C'était Marcus Garvey	p.68
Yanick FEPEKAM NOUPAYIE, Reconfiguration du nationalisme Camerounais dans <i>Empreintes de Crabes</i> de Patrice Nganang	p.78
KOUASSI Tanoh Valéry, Temporalités et disqualification du l'alimentation chez les accompagnants à l'unité oncologie pédiatrique du CHU de Treichville	p.89
WABIY SALAWU (<i>PhD</i>),Corruption ou culture dominante dans <i>L'homme rompu</i> de Tahar Ben Jelloun (1994)	p.101
Ibrahima Khalilou Diagne, Interdits liées à la confection de la céramique en milieu Wolof dans les localités de Tivaouane et Kébémér au Sénégal. Regard ethnographique	p.109
Papa Samba Ndiaye, Le héros racinien: un être à géométrie variable	p.124
SECKA GUEYE, Le réalisme militant chez Sembène Ousmane	p.134
Eric MOUKODOUMOU MIDEPANI, L'initié dans le destin d'un guerrier de Joseph Bill Mamboungou	p.144
Arsène MAGNIMA- KAKASSA, Le vieux nègre et la médaille: entre colonialisme et postcolonialisme	p.158
Tiako Djomatchoua Murielle Sandra, Crimes et châtiments surnaturels chez Djibi Thiam et Seydou Badian : une lecture de <i>Ma sœur la panthère</i> et les noces sacrées	p.169
ASSANA BRAHIM, Périphérie de la poésie camerounaise contemporaine : stratégies de la rhétorique publicitaire du positionnement du périphrase.....	p.180
Delphe Kifouani NKOUIKANI, Le temps des héroïnes: rapports de sexe, pouvoirs et résistance des femmes dans <i>Félicité</i> d'Alain Gomis	p.191

THATCHERISM AND FAMILY STRIFE IN JONATHAN COE'S *WHAT A CARVE UP !*

SILUE Ténéna Mamadou
Université Alassane Ouattara, Bouaké (Côte d'Ivoire)
Email: silue_tenena@yahoo.com

Abstract:

The policies of Mrs Thatcher's governments have been an unmitigated disaster for the stability of British families. Despite Mrs Thatcher's own achievement in the reconstruction of post war Britain's economy, her indifference to socio-political consensus through radical legislative or institutional changes, and her attacks on the welfare systems, are regarded as having seriously undermined the British families' structure in 1980s. Thus, the paper examines the ideology of Thatcherism in the light of family strife in Jonathan Coe's *What a Carve Up*. Therefore, it rests on Althusser's conceptual framework of ideology meant to show how family members' breakdown is an expression of Thatcherism.

Key-words: Confrontation, family strife, ideology, marketization, oppressed, Thatcherism,

Résumé:

Les politiques des gouvernements de Mme Thatcher ont été un désastre total pour la stabilité des familles britanniques. Malgré le succès de Mme Thatcher dans la reconstruction de l'économie britannique d'après-guerre, son indifférence au consensus sociopolitique à travers le changement législatif ou institutionnel radicale et ses attaques contre le système de protection sociale ont sérieusement contribué à l'ébranlement de la structure des familles britanniques des années 80. Dans ce sens, l'article s'appuie sur le cadre conceptuel de l'idéologie d'Althusser pour montrer comment l'éclatement de la famille est symptomatique de l'idéologie thatcherisme.

Mots-clés : Confrontation, conflit familial, idéologie, marché, opprimé, Thatcherisme

Introduction

In trying to assess the impact of Thatcherism on British families Diana Gittins in *The Family in Question: Changing Households and Familiar Ideologies* (2017) writes that: "During the Thatcher year the family was seized upon by (...) the cause of myriad social problems (delinquency, illegitimacy, drug addiction, divorce) (..)" (2017: 3). This quote encapsulates that the political and socio-economic system of Thatcher's society as a whole, have increasingly diluted the structure of British families. Mrs Thatcher pursued policies which reinforced cleavages. Her emphasis on the competitive nature of free market and her privatization policy fostered social division, as Ruth Wittlinger puts it: "Thatcher presided over the most divisive and confrontational period in British post war history. Particularly the first half of the decade was characterized by social tensions" (2002 : 27). Wittlinger sums up much of the feud or quarrel that Thatcher's policies left on the structure of British families.

Not only did she divide the family unity, but she also introduced the values of self-responsibilities and entrepreneurship which exacerbate individualism within the society. As such Thatcherism is reflected and refracted in contemporary British fiction, as the reviewer Andy Beckett writes:

Memorable fiction that explicitly addresses what she did to Britain between 1979 and 1990 can arguably be listed thus: *What a Carve Up!* by Jonathan Coe, *Downriver* by Iain Sinclair, and possibly *Trainspotting* by Irvine Welsh. What is more, all these books add plenty of other elements - black farce, old London mysteries and the world of the modern heroin addict respectively - to their descriptions of people being buffeted and changed by the proclamations from 10 Downing Street. References to the obvious landmarks of Thatcherism are kept reasonably sparing (Beckett: 1979, P.75)

In the above passage Jonathan Coe's *What a Carve Up* paints a picture of the impact Margaret Thatcher has had, and is still having, on the British literary landscape. Jonathan Coe is one of the most established and widely Thatcherite read novelists in contemporary Britain. *What A Carve Up!* (WC) is his third novel. And it is about the tragic end of a well-established British family, the Winshaws, one of whose members was shot down by the German air force during the Second World War. This book is centered on the shifting of England between World War II and the early 1990. At that moment Margaret Thatcher's privatization and marketing policies fostered social divisions and tensions among British family members.

The intention of this paper is to show how family strife is correlated to the ideology of Thatcherism in Jonathan Coe's *What a Carve Up*. Specifically, how is the fragmentation of the British Family tethered to Thatcherism in Jonathan Coe's fiction? To what extent does the ideology of Thatcherism shape the novel's structure? Drawing upon Althusser's concept of ideology, we seek to show how Thatcher's privatization policies and marketization of life contributed to undermining the family members' cohesion and consensus in Britain. The French Theoretician asserts that "ideology hails or interpellates concrete individuals as concrete subjects" (Althusser, 2003). In other words, ideology controls over the individuals and through the careful action of "interpellation" or hailing transforms them into subjects. From this perspective we suggest that the family feud and instabilities in the fiction are tethered to the dominant ideology.

To carry out the analysis we will first look at the correlation between the Thatcherite market ideology and conflict and then explore the dialectic opposition between the oppressed and the ideology or hegemony throughout Althusser's concept of ideology and ISAs.

1- The Thatcherite Market Ideology and Conflict

In Jonathan Coe's fiction the Thatcherite market ideology is the essential ingredient framework in which family feud operates. The ideology of Thatcherism is one in which the market and privatization policies hold a significant place. Thatcherism gives predominance to individualism over collectivism. This preponderance to the individual endeavor over the group gives rise to the negligence of some individuals as part of the social network. This social classification of people in league with their effort to market policies has two major declensions. In *What a Carve Up* (Coe, 1994), it first of all fragmented family units as a

whole and then it leads to a rebellion of the oppressed against the dominant ideology. For Coe, the Thatcherite materialistic ideology is the main element that triggers family crisis. This amounts to saying that the market philosophy or ideology Margaret Thatcher championed is at the center of the dispute between the Winshaws (under the aegis of Thatcherite elites). Thabitha Winshaw's mental attitudes towards Lawrence is revealed in this paragraph:

Poor aunty Tabs has driven completely bats by the news, and has started accusing Uncle Lawrence of murdering his own brother. She physically attacked him in the hall way as he was coming down for dinner: tried to bash him over the head with a croquet mallet. Apparently this was about the sixth time this has happened. They tried not to let me see what was going on (Jonathan Coe: 1994: 120)

Godfrey's demise is a disturbing experience to Tabitha. Her sudden change from healthy woman to a sick one unveils the distortion and perplexity of her emotional feeling. This surprising shift from health to sickness expresses the cognitive structure of the dominant ideology. What is labored here is the mental perception and working of ideology. As Althusser argues "ideology is inescapable, that is individuals are always-already subjects" (2003: 11). In the same token, Rayna Rapp in her article "Examining Family History" (2003) argues that: "the notion of family has been overly objectified and should be seen instead as a cultural device, an ideology, for a larger social purpose" (2003: 1). As such, whatever befalls a family might be connected to a certain ideology. What these writers elaborate about the function and mental perception of ideology parallels with the mental stress Thabitha experienced.

The above lines (Coe, 1994: 120) shows a series of binaries, or social contradictions which are seen through powerful images and metaphors: poor Aunt/Murderer Lawrence, evil/good, madness/reason (Coe, 1994: 120). All these images and metaphors were to be noted in Mrs Thatcher's discourses when she started dismantling the British Welfare system. There is a parallel between Thabitha's mental problem after Godfrey's death and the sentiment that Thatcherism aroused in British society. The text suggests that a family world in flux is a society in which the old Victorian family stability is challenged by Thatcherite political and social change. Thabitha's disturbing emotion is especially appropriate subject for the instabilities Thatcherism bequeathed to British families.

Here, Thabitha's complain about his brother's materialistic behaviour is meant to show her prime concern about monetarism. By qualifying Lawrence as the worst enemy who kills his brother for the sake of money, Thabitha explicitly regards Thatcherism as the ideology which impedes the commitment to brotherhood that would assure individual survival within the family network. Thatcherism is the ideology that rules Lawrence's mind. Had Lawrence been living in a spiritual society he could have acted in accordance with its ideology. In corroboration with that Althusser thinks of ideology as the main instrument of domination:

Men live their actions, usually referred to as freedom and 'consciousness' by the classical tradition, in ideology, by and through ideology; in short, the 'lived' relation between men and the world, including History (in political action or inaction), passes through ideology, or better, is ideology itself" (Ferreter, 2006: 21).

In this extract, Althusser's ideology is a cluster of beliefs that works in our minds as common sense and let the existing conditions reproduce themselves. Moreover, these beliefs are set and supported by the ruling class. Furthermore, Althusser describes the second feature of ideology which is the "material existence" of ideology. He claims that all the ideas or representations which shape the ideology do not have a spiritual or ideal existence:

I shall therefore say that, where only a single subject (such and such individual) is concerned, the existence of the ideas of his belief is material in that his ideas are his material actions inserted into his material practices governed by material rituals which are themselves defined by the material ideological apparatus from which we derive the ideas of that subject (Althusser, 2003: 2)

At this point, the issue labored by the French theoretician is the concept of "material ideological apparatus" (Althusser: 2003: 2). It is the goods or the services on the market that govern every ideology.

In Coe's understanding the material ideological apparatus that Thatcherism displayed is money. The writer confronts Lawrence's monetarism with Thatcher's humanism. According to him humans are either materialistic in outlook or spiritual in stance. This observation is applicable to Thatcher and Lawrence, as they appear in word-pairs to confront materialism with Puritanism or brotherhood in the binaries of good/evil, saved/damned, truth/lies, money/morality. The combination of these contradictory entities makes the reader to sympathize with the spiritual ideology, for Lawrence and the rest of the Winshaw fall to the worst. Another important feature of the Thatcherite materialistic philosophy is individual suffering. When the monetary ideology is promoted in a society, the poor are likely to live in squalor. This squalidity increases tension in the family and the society as a whole. In the opening chapter; the words of the character Michael, are clear enough to reveal the implication of the dominant political ideology in family life: "The 1980s weren't a good time for me, on the whole. I suppose they weren't for a lot of people" (Jonathan Coe: 1994, 102).

This declarative statement is an explicit indictment of Thatcherism. By including all the people in his plight during Thatcher years, the narrator strategically reveals that individuals Britain suffered from the materialistic philosophy of Thatcher. It may be referred to as a harsh period that undermines social peace and harmony in each family of the imaginary British society. Strife appears in sundry ways in the households. In effect, strife connotes people's incapacities to cope with poverty. They are unable to come together because of their economic situation. In the third person narrator's voice (I), this incapacity to live peacefully is due to 80's materialism. Moreover, Thatcher's shift to market-oriented economic policies brought about a crisis of confidence within British families. Market policies break spouses' mutual –assurance in each other. The one who easily thrives with his individual business undertaking in the couple become regardless to his or her partner. An element of that is the marital row between Dorothy Winshaw and her husband George. Dorothy begins the Thatcherite deregulation policy of the farming sector by removing her husband, George Brunwin, from the running of her farm:

The latest issue of *Poultry News*: George spent many nights like this, shortly after his marriage to Dorothy, because she had persuaded him that it was in his interest to

join the council of the National Farmers' Union. He served on it for little more than a year, and discovered in the process that he had no talent for lobbying or committee work, and that he had nothing in common with the other members, none of whom shared his enthusiasm for the day-to-day running of farms(He got the impression that most of them had joined the council to get away from it.) and when he gave up this position and Dorothy herself took his place, she made it clear that she didn't trust him, by this stage, to look after the farm in her absence(Jonathan Coe: 1994, P 244)

In this analysis we note that among other things the crisis of confidence between Dorothy Winshaw and her husband, George over the management of their farming business. The fact that Dorothy seems unembarrassed by the removal of her husband from the farming business might suggest a certain Thatcherite sangfroid and robustness. Dorothy shows toughness while removing her husband from the management of the farm. This authoritative hardiness is an expression of her embracement of a rugged materialistic market policy. The third person narrator hints at it when he informs the reader about Dorothy's desire to join the council of the National Farmers' Union. Her membership to this farming council metaphorically refers to Thatcher's farming policy. Margaret Thatcher was encouraging British farmers to join the Farmer's Council so that they can produce a lot and be competitive on the market. Thus, Dorothy after marrying George Brunwin starts running his well- known farm in accordance with Thatcherite elites' farming doctrine as the narrator asserts:

Dorothy had a head start on her rivals in this respect, since Thomas Winshaw was by now well on his way to becoming one of the most powerful members of the banking establishment. When he learned of the direction government policy was taking, he began to invest heavily in agricultural land, and was more than happy to offer Dorothy substantial loans—with land as security- for her various expansion programmes(the size of the debt obliging her, every year, to force higher and higher yield out of her soil and stock). From the outset, her aim was to guarantee profits by controlling every stage of production. She began by buying up all the smaller farms in the country and putting them under contract. Then, once she had established her stranglehold on most of the egg, chicken, bacon and vegetable supplies to the North East of England, she started to expand her sphere of operations(Jonathan Coe, 1994, P245)

Dorothy's involvement in farming enables us to see different concepts of farming: The traditional, organic farming system of her husband, George Brunwin, and the industrialized ones of Dorothy. It is not Dorothy Winshaw's approach to industrialized farming which is only being questioned in the novel. It is her confrontation with her husband, George which shows how the pursuit of Thatcherite market policies subverts the Victorian patriarchal norms and creates tensions in couples' lives. Dorothy's industrialized farming practice is carefully constructed in the narrative but at the same time there are many gaps in its application on the ground. As hinted above, throughout family's dispute, *What a Carve Up* (Coe, 1994) sheds light on the effect of Thatcherite market ideology. In the view of Marx and Engels, ideology is first of all defined as the prevailing ideas of an age (1974: 17). According to the political economy of these philosophers, these dominant ideas were associated with those of the ruling class. They are part of the 'superstructure and hence determined by the economic or 'material'

base of society. As such the ruling class controls the means of production and (re)production of ideas — most notably those of politics, the media, literature and education — .They are also able to make their ideologies more or less accepted by the ruled class as the undisputed knowledge of the 'natural' ways things are. However, this Thatcherite market ideology is also challenged by the ruled class and the opposition.

2- The Oppressed Vs. the Ideology

In his writing, Coe stands against the principle of the Thatcherite world market coming into being. He does not share the idea that the oppressed or marginalized individual and Thatcherite elites (under the aegis of the Winshaw) can have some bonds, making them become blurred worlds: what is called the oppressed. On the contrary, the British novelist does see the line of separation between them and the materialists. For the British writer, the materialistic ideology is not fair. This dialectic which shows the oppressed and the dominant ideology as exclusive paradigms also foregrounds the revolutionary epistemology of the weak over the strong. In other words, the dominated subject always seeks to overthrow the hegemony. The central idea is that the counter-hegemonic voices consider themselves as seeking to repair injustice and reconcile the society with itself. This search for justice and reparation in *What a Carve Up*, opposes the oppressed (in which Thabitha Winshaw and Michael Owen fall) to the ideology or hegemony realm where the powerful Thatcherite elites dwell. In the novel, Thabitha and Michael think that they have to escape oppression and repair the social fabric through the promotion of mutual understanding and peace. Characterized by this single-minded experience of peace and social cohesion, they assess all happenings in accordance with the philosophy and state of mind that govern the proletariats. This marginalized people's assumption makes them less commiserate with the superstructure. They view Thatcherite elites as the devil and the wicked people to defeat through individual and collective action. Verbal attack is precisely the first individual strategy against the ideology as revealed in this episode:

She sighed. "but then who could really do justice to myfamily? Liars, Cheats, Swindlers and hypocrites, the hotof them. And Lawrence was the worst. By far, the worst to betray your country for money is bad enough, but to send your own brother to his death....(Jonathan Coe: 1994,477)

What is at issue here is the insult rhetoric the marginalized character directed against the superstructure or the ideology. Actually, insults are not thoughts that are limited to the insulted person. They may also pertain to evaluations, that is, to what we think (find) to be good or bad, nice or ugly, permitted or forbidden, acceptable or unacceptable, and so on — the products of judgments based on values or norms. Such insults are commonly viewed as opinions which prominently suggest an individual attack on a specific ideology. In this vein Bourdieu postulates that: "insult or verbal abuse affects the "social capital" of the insulted person, his or her social relations within his or her network" (1980: 13). Bourdieu's connection of an insult with its individual society's ideology also corroborates Althusserian postulation of ideology. As a Marxist, Althusser considered people's actions, choices, values, desires, judgments, and preferences as products of social experiences. This

is why he claims that ideology is unchanging and present throughout history; “ideology has no history” (Althusser, 2003). In the same token, Thabitha’s abuse against Lawrence is her individual strategies to evaluate the Thatcherite social ideology. Given that she disapproves her brother’s action, she explicitly rejects the ideology.

Furthermore, the dialectic opposition between the oppressed and the ideology is also revealed through collective actions. When the oppressed people join strength in a specific ideological fight, they are planning to oppose a master narrative story of the ideology. The writer creates a collective discourse of the marginalized people underlying Thatcherite ideology. This is what the praxis philosopher, Gramsci termed as “the Counter-Hegemonic discourse” (1968: 21). In his understanding this kind of discourse belongs to the oppressed people who defy the hegemony. In *What a Carve Up* (Coe, 1994) the marginalized society counter- hegemonic discourse is carried out by Thabitha Winshaw and Michael Owen. By implication they decide to write about the hegemony from their own perspective:

My name’s Michael Owen, ‘ he answered,’ ‘and I’m a writer, among my unfinished works is a history of your family; parts of which you might even have read yourself.’ ‘Why, Mr Owen!’ cried Tabitha, putting down her needles and clapping her hands in delights when she heard this news. ‘ I was wondering if you’d be able t come. (Jonathan Coe, 1994: P, 432)

As indicated in the passage, Michael’s decision to write about the Winshaws and Thabitha’s welcoming of the news explicitly indicates a collective action against the ideology. They belong to a group who has the same interest. That is to trounce the oppressor and its ideology. In this collective action of the oppressed, we can see the working of an opposition ideology. There are good theoretical and empirical reasons to assume that there are also ideologies of opposition, resistance, or ideologies of competition between equally powerful groups. These ideologies promote internal cohesion of a group, or ideologies about the survival of humankind. As such, ideology in Coe’s approach is not inherently negative, nor limited to social structures of domination.

Through a collective action, the oppressed can impose a resistance to the ruling system. That counter power ideology broke into pieces with the Thatcherite positivistic market philosophy. The collective action aims at endorsing voluntarism, an activist theory of social and political action which the praxis philosopher evoked as “activist theory” (1968: 21). In their view, the Winshaws represent bits of stuff without rhyme or reason, which fail to add up to any total or meaningful design to British society. One might therefore see Thabitha and Michael as the opposite of the totalitarian Thatcherite regime portrayed by the narrative. In the same way, they might be seen as a force that defies Thatcherite social regulation. Coe’s novel flaunts the collective action as virtuous activist movements which can help reconcile the fractured families of the plot. One might see the activists’ self- righteousness, moralistic and mildly masochistic attitudes in their refusal to follow the dominant ideology. Yet it is hard to see how they could be open- hearted and high- spirited in the Thatcherite oppressive circumstances in which they are caught as the narrator puts it:

But all my instincts tell me that it will be unraveled soon, very soon. I'm just sorry the forces of law have intervened to stop me from playing an active part. ' He took my hand and held it in a fragile but determined grip. ' For the next two months, Michael, you're my ears and eyes. (Jonathan Coe, 1994: P 346)

These lines appear as a testimony of Michael who acknowledges his vulnerability in his poor living place. As long as there are harsh minded Winshaws around, as to drag you off to an early death, an orphaned, vulnerable young boy like Michael would be ill advised to espouse tenderness and good morality. The limited vision of Michael in his writing of the Winshaw's story means that he cannot always make coherent sense of the experience of resistance ideology. This can lead to some amusing or alarming situations. But it also means that a character like Michael Owen cannot have full understanding of the system which is the source of his suffering. All he wants is immediate resistance, an impulse with which we naturally sympathize. What is at stake is the heartless logic of a whole capitalist society, as the later Michael and Thatbitha would come to collectively defeat:

Row, row, row the boat, gently down the stream
Merrily, merrily, merrily, merrily
Life is but a dream. (...) 'Do you want me to show you how it's done?'
says Tabitha. Michael is shaking her roughly backwards and forwards.
(Jonathan Coe, 1994: P, 491)

Ironically this statement like "row, row, row the boat"(Coe, 1994: 491) is verbal overkill with a vengeance against a whole group or elite. Michael and Thabitha sing it to announce the passing of Thatcherite figures, the Winshaws. To try to capture the essence of the politics of consensus under Thatcher is inevitably to find ourselves singing this alluring song. Yet there is an irony in the above song. A writer may pile phrase upon phrase and adjective upon adjective in order to pin down the elusive essence of a thing. But the more language he throws at a character or situation, the more he tends to bury it beneath a heap of generalities. Michael's celebration of the Winshaw's death equates the same glamour Thatcher expressed at the death of British socialism. By empowering the Winshaws with a controversial and divisive power, the novel eschews disagreement as the way of social structure. In the light of that Coe can be aligned with the Marxist critic, Brecht, for he also believed that "social existence was made up of contradictions, and that these contradictions went to the heart of people's identities" (Brecht, 1969: P, 65). To show men and women as they really are is to show them as changeable, inconsistent and self- divided. The idea of character as unified and coherent struck Brecht as an illusion.

In this sense, Coe's characters cannot surprise us. They rarely come as unified and coherent individuals. They can leap suddenly out of windows and detest a person for life. The novel does not seem particularly embarrassed by this lack of cohesion among them, or to notice it as obstructing the development of the plot. Michael, the imaginary narrator resists the way the Winshaw tries to appropriate him. Conflicting, even contradictory views of him overlap, without being resolved into a coherent whole. In trying to display the Winshaw's feud, the novel succeeds only in destabilising our sense of Thatcherism. The book is full of images of pricking, piercing and penetrating, as though the narrator, Michael has erotic fantasies of possessing his protagonists to the full. In the end, however, he is not

to be pinned down. *What a Carve Up*, paints a Thatcherite view of English families under Margaret Thatcher in which the novel's action is set. Indeed, the ending of Coe's plot is partially staged in favour of the oppressed and the ideology of the resistance. Yet in real life, it does not always work this way. There is an alternative ending with Thomas Hardy's *Jude The Obscure*, in which the oppressed Jude and Sue's whole lives are thwarted by the strict Victorian ideology. Contrary to Hardy, Coe puts all the blames on the Thatcherite characters. He portrays them as divisive, villains, devils, arrogant, permissive, unworthy individuals and troublesome people who violate social norms.

In Coe's understanding ideology is multi-dimensional, for there is a kind of happy endings in the novel. But these happy endings are really fantasies, and fantasy, as Freud remarked, is 'a correction of an unsatisfying reality' (168–9: 103). We know that in the real British society Thatcher's legacies are still available. Her austere critics were taken aback to see her successors following her policies of liberalism and marketization. So Thatcherism is fully adopted by all parties in today's Britain. By slaying the Thatcherite members in the novel Coe is just strategically correcting a reality which is unpleasant for British families. It can be noted that for, Althusser, ideology is "the representation of the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence" (2003: 18). This is to say, ideology is a distortion of reality. The illusiveness of reality is implied in the description of Thatcherite market ideology used to describe British families feud during Margaret Thatcher's reign. In this way, the opposition of real/illusive is undermined as the real appears to be unreal and the illusive is taken to be real.

Conclusion

In this paper, my concern was to decipher the correlation between the Thatcherite ideology and British family feud in Jonathan Coe's fiction, particularly in his *What a Carve Up*. Resting upon Althusserian ISAs we investigate the ways in which Thatcher's conviction politics has broken down the consensus within British families. It comes out that the British family feud amounts to the fact that its members refuse to abide by a consensus politics. They were all adamant on their argument and choices of lives. The oppressed and the hegemony never compromise on what they believe. They were proud of their ability not to turn, not to compromise, to stick to their purpose until it is complete. The narratives are also arranged in the way that there is a single chapter devoted to every belief. Thus, at the twilight of this reflection, I can assert that Thatcherism was a very divisive market ideology which triggered conflict in British families. Today, the hierarchical epistemology of Thatcherism is present in many spheres. In international relations, Thatcher's neoliberal ideology continues to rule over the rest of the world, mainly the western World. In the United Kingdom, the market norm is still present. The different Prime Ministers from the late John Major to Boris Johnson have continued implementing her neoliberal precepts of society. The less state's intervention policy of Margaret Thatcher is still the creed of British government.

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