



A Study of Individualization in J.B. Priestley's *An Inspector Calls*

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ABSTRACT

The present article aims at interpreting J.B. Priestley's *An Inspector Calls* through the lens of capitalism as an individualizing phenomenon described in *Individualization Institutionalized Individualism and its Social and Political Consequences* by Ulrich Beck and Elisabeth Beck-Gernsheim. It is to see how in terms of free market-economy, individualization is an anti-social ideology which works to divide people into individuals and brings about feelings of selfishness and individualism among them. This present study explores how the individualizing factor becomes too pressing to deprive the Berling family and the Croft family of social ability and humanitarian approach towards less privileged class girl, Miss Daisy Renton. Consequently, the same individualization makes the capitalists selfish, passionless and cruel to such an extent that all members of the manufacturing families are bent upon punishing the labourer, Miss Eva Smith/ Miss Daisy Renton because she raises her voice for her rights. The continuous exploitation leaves no room for her. Individualization in the play under analysis induces the capitalists to have rat race after more and more profit at the cost of others' sufferings till their death. Hence, it is individualistic approach in capitalism that forces a girl named Eva Smith to commit suicide as she is left alone in the world of capitalists who blackmail and torture her for her being shelterless and jobless. Investigation of individualization in the play under study is much important because it makes the public aware of individualizing impact of capitalism on the proletariat.

Key Words: *An Inspector Calls*, J. B. Priestly, Beck-Gernshim individualization

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1. Introduction

The present study analyzes J. B. Priestley's *An Inspector Calls* from the perspective of individualization, a feature of modern capitalism which aims to divide people, giving them free hands to excel in society. At the same time, it tends to scatter society into individuals, having no coordination and sympathy for each other. Co-authored work *Individualization Institutionalized Individualism and its Social and Political Consequences* by Ulrich Beck and Elisabeth Beck-Gernsheim is a detailed analysis of modern society which individualizes society to safeguard interests of the bourgeois.

According to the theorists, modern society is based on idea of liberalization which gives free hand to people as individual competitors. Apart from making people self-sufficient, it ends up in getting rid of social as well as moral obligation to help each other in time of necessity. Thus, the proposed model of individualization is devoid of cooperation on which societies are usually based. Such tendency puts many regulations, demands and constraints on individuals working in free market economy. It is non-social ideology which burdens the individuals with no philanthropic feelings. It is always win-win race in which each has to struggle hard to compete with the bourgeois.

J. B. Priestley is an English novelist, playwright, screen writer, broadcaster, and social commentator. He has written more than twenty novels, short stories as many as plays. His works include several films, television works, literary criticism, and autobiographical essays etc. *An Inspector Calls* revolves around capitalistic psychology of two families i.e., the Berlings and the Crofts who are seen blind to philanthropy and humanitarianism. Consequently, they bend upon bringing agony, ruin and agitating death upon Miss Eva Smith/Daisy Renton whose only crime is that she belongs to a working class. As this story revolves around two business families who are tycoon in manufacturing, it represents bourgeois the Berling and the Croft who are always in conflict with the proletariat. The very concept of selfishness revolves around the idea that people are individualistic rather than social human beings. Hence, this play explores individualistic trends in capitalism as the following dialogue of Berling goes: 'But the way some of these cranks talk and write now, you'd think everybody has to look after else, as if we were all mixed up like





bees in a hive-- community and all that nonsense...' This is how Berling makes fun of socialist ideas which are aimed at supporting the cause of the poor working-class people.

It is Arthur Berling who shows individualization and self-centeredness when he fires a hardworking girl, Eva Smith, for the simple reason that she demands increase in salary to fulfill her daily needs. Further reading of the play shows other characters, practicing the same sense of individualism in the world of economy as they keep others at stone's throw. Consequently, it inculcates sense of being anti-social or individualistic. Another Berling member, Miss Sheila Berling, shows her empathy towards Daisy Renton at Milwards and sends her to lead pathetic life, taking refuge in one man or the other afterwards. Later on, Eric Berling blackmails Daisy Renton because she belongs to working class, having no stake in society.

As the play under discussion consists in individualistic philosophy of life on the part of the characters, it can be analyzed through individualization as presented by Ulrich Beck and Elisabeth Beck-Gernsheim. The study of individualization will give new insight into the play under investigation. It makes the readers aware of psyche of the capitalists whose selfish and individualistic nature exercise negative impact on the working-class people.

2. Literature Review

In order to develop background and research gap to the work and the theory, various sources such as research articles, dissertations, research journals and reviews have been explored. The main objective of the literature review is to see previous knowledge with relevance to J.B. Priestley's *An Inspector Calls* so that research gap may be developed. Such foreknowledge builds up foundation of the study to see the present research in the light of the past endeavours. Review of literature is as follows:

In an article titled as *A Postmodernist Calls: Priestley, Daldry and the British Empire* Aleks Sierz (1992) tries to explore strong relationship between Marxism, totalitarianism, and dystopia as all of these come out to help one another. Although written after WW2, it portrays pre-WW1 era to show that middle class is on the verge of destruction because of its selfish approach to society. It portrays strong relationship between capital and politics as both depend on each other. It shows the capitalist class is on the rise whereas the working class faces status





quo. It discusses different changes which occur when the play is performed under the supervision of Daldry and many other people who brought about some theatrical changes in order to portray its message.

In an article published in 2002, titled as *J.B. Priestley in the Theatre of Time*, Jesse Martz, a Kenyon teacher as well as researcher explores the playwright's technique of writing plays which work as screen to depict socio-political and economic trends of time under the warring atmosphere in Europe, especially England. The play's timing enjoys significance as it depicts mysterious and absurd circumstances in which all members of the same family drag an innocent girl to her suicide. According to the researcher, the play is replete with plenty of mysteries which remain unresolved till the end. Inspector Goole, his extraordinary knowledge about tragedy and suicide timing remains a riddle. It makes the entire Berling family responsible for the unfortunate fate of Miss Eva Smith. The study gives stress on upper classes in England to come up with helping hand for the poor in order to bring about justice and change in the country. Hence, the play links events to cultural and social circumstances which partake of behaviour of the characters involved.

In a thesis titled as *Critique of Patriarchal and Capitalist Ideologies in Priestley's An Inspector Calls*, the researcher, Dipika Panthi (2013), interprets novel from the perspective of Marxist feminism. According to the findings, the capitalists and patriarchs dominate proletariat, the working-class females such as Eva Smith. Being a worker, she cannot escape cruel claws of the bourgeois who make her life deplorable. She is left with no other option than silent resistance in the form of suicide. The play shows Arthur Berling, Mrs. Sybil Berling, Miss Sheila Berling, Mr. Eric Berling and Gerald Croft exercising their influence by means of strong economy. The researcher explores that death is the only world which gives refuge to Miss Eva Smith who commits suicide by taking a large amount of disinfectants.

Basavarajappa H.M. (2020) in an article titled as *J.B. Priestley's Play An Inspector Calls as a Social Drama*, explores moral tone in the story of the play as it revolves around social issues of working women in industrial states. Through dismal life of Miss Eva Smith, the researcher highlights selfishness and arrogance of the capitalist in Edwardian society. The play has socialist bearing as the character of Inspector Goole is a mouthpiece of socialist





ideology. His message of social responsibility runs through the entire play. It is Goole who attempts to inculcate sense of shame and guilt in the mind of the Berlings and Crofts. It is open ended play because it does not have proper ending. The suspense remains its integral part. It makes readers and audience active to draw their own conclusions.

By giving gist of the previous research works related to the play and the theory under discussion, it becomes quite clear that much work has been done on capitalism as well as J.B. Priestley's *An Inspector Calls*. Contribution of the previous research endeavours matters a lot, but they have not analyzed the play under study through the lens of individualization as presented by Ulrich Beck and Elisabeth Beck-Gernsheim. This study is much important because it fulfills the research gap by investigating consequences of individualism on working class people e.g., Miss Eva Smith. It makes the readers aware of the consequences of individualism for the proletariat. Hence, it suggests ways and means by which common people may be well informed about the psyche of the capitalist.

3. Research Statement

A cursory glance at J.B. Priestley's *An Inspector Calls* is enough to indicate a strong impression that this play is quite suitable to be explored through the lens of individualization, a feature of modern capitalism.

4. Research Methodology

The present research interprets J.B. Priestley's *An Inspector Calls* through the lens of individualization, a feature of capitalism. It was presented in a co-authored work *Individualization Institutionalized Individualism and its Social and Political Consequences* by Ulrich Beck and Elisabeth Beck-Gernsheim. Published in 2001, the book highlights pros and cons of individualism from social, political and economic perspectives. According to the theorists, individualization gives liberty, but it goes against socializing nature of society and tends to create divide and conflict in people on the basis of capital and power. The study is qualitative in nature. It is thematic analysis of the play. Primary source is J.B. Priestley's *An Inspector Calls*; whereas articles, research papers, reviews and other internet oriented sources are taken as secondary sources of research process.





5. Research Questions

- i) How is capitalist ideology manifested in J.B. Priestley's *An Inspector Calls*?
- ii) What are the reasons that contribute to individualization in J.B. Priestley's *An Inspector Calls*?
- iii) How does individualizing approach in capitalism affect lives of common people?

6. Data Analysis

An Inspector Calls is one of the best-known works of J.B. Priestly who, in this play, shows a story of manufacturer-cum-capitalist class which is possessed with ideology of individualization in capitalism. This ideology induces them to run after money and power at the cost of others' suffering. Capitalism is, basically, an attitude to get more and more profit and earning whether it is by fair or foul means. *An Inspector Calls* is replete with such examples, episodes, dialogues, events and certain dealings which portray capitalism-oriented psyche of the characters portrayed in the play under study. The story is about two renowned families, Berlings and Crofts, who have set up large business empire in an imaginary industrial area somewhere in, Brumley, Midlands.

The basic instinct which runs in the blood of Mr. Arthur Berling, who is guardian of the Berling family, is lack of social ability as he thinks that those who have earned money should not spend it on others. According to him, the idea of man as a social human being is nonsense because he believes that it is not his liability to help the poor and the needy. In the very first message that he delivers to the young couple, he shows how capitalism works and how it tries to divide people into individuals, depriving them of the instinct to help and assist the lesser human beings. Berling says, 'But the way some of these cranks talk and write now, you'd think everybody has to look after else, as if we were all mixed up like bees in a hive-- community and all that nonsense'. This statement expresses mentality of the capitalist Berling family that does not care for rights of others. It expresses selfishness on the part of the manufacturing class that individualizes people.

Arthur Berling's character manifests individualization. He is against all those who favor socialism as he says, 'We can't let these Bernard Shaws and H.G. Wells do all the talking'. These lines show his hatred towards socialist writers. According to him, it is unwise and





abnormal approach to talk about philanthropic steps towards the less privileged classes. It is because capitalism as evil snatches basic human instincts from the Berling family who have become parasites, sucking blood of the working class. Moral sense, social duty and uprightness are a far cry for the capitalist Berlings and Crofts whose main interest lies in safeguarding their economic interests. They do not care if their rat race makes others suffer from tragic outcome. Here, the introductory engagement ceremony is more an economic bond than a selfless relationship between the two families. Gerald Croft and Sheila Berling are used as tools to protect economic interests of two families.

Capitalism divides people into classes on the basis of their economic position which categorizes them into the bourgeois and the proletariat. It is unequal power sharing as one of the classes i.e., proletariat is always at receiving end and the other bourgeois class is always giving end. Berling says, 'a man has to make his own way- has to look after himself. And his family too, of course, when he has one'. It means the Berling and the Crofts always exercise their economic power over others; whereas the people like Miss Eva Smith are always faced with sufferings. It is relationship between producer and consumer in which the first has advantage over the second. Girls like Miss Eva Smith are forced to work in the manufacturing plants of the Berling who are cruel and unforgiving towards working class girl, Miss Eva Smith. Capitalism revolves around relationship of power which is not shared; rather is exercised from the heavy pocketed Berling and Croft family to the proletariat, Miss Eva Smith, who is representative of all people belonging to working class, facing trouble, tribulations and misery at the hands of manufacturers.

Capitalistic approach gives self-identity to those who belong to producing community. The same self-identity of being capitalists is exercised by all the members who want to keep up their appearance at the cost of sufferings for others like Eva Smith/Daisy Renton. Arthur Berling thinks that he has no responsibility to give helping hand to others. When some workers go on strike, he does not compensate for the sufferings of the lesser classes and takes a strict action against those who, according to him, create disturbance. Berling says, 'Still, I can't accept the responsibility. If we were all responsible for everything that happened to everybody, we'd have anything to do with, it would be very awkward, wouldn't it?' The sacking of Eva Smith among





other workers shows working of capitalistic mind set which does not take responsibility. A wall is built which allows the rich to separate themselves from the poor. It shows that capitalism individualizes people in order to make them weak.

The capitalist class inserts its ideology of capitalism, using sufferers as pickpockets to be used as per their self-centered approach to life in society. Eric Berling who is the youngest of the family knows how to make use of Eva Smith as he not only cheats his own father in order to quench his sexual thirst from a suffering girl, but also, he does his best to snatch each and everything from the girl by making her pregnant, sending her into a merciless world. Eric's misuse and so-called helpfulness are, basically, means to win her body. It is this power of economy which subjugates others at the pretext of helping the trodden classes. The capitalist take advantages of others' weaknesses and suck their blood under the guise of rescuing them.

Individualization as a philosophy of life fails to take people as social identity. On the contrary, capitalism in the play under study is an evil and it tends to be individualistic in approach. The first and foremost job of capitalists is to take people singularly. Hence, it tends to be selfish and self-centered in nature. The same happens in the play under investigation where the manufacturing class fails to realize that man is a social animal whose best part of nature is to spend life on the basis of give-and-take philosophy. Contrarily, capitalists, in the play under analysis, are narcissists as they follow divide and rule policy where the bourgeois rule the proletariat. There is deep rooted divide between the high and the low. The same divide is based on economy which makes people to be individualistic rather than socialistic. Idea of individualism is deeply inculcated in the Berling and the Croft family who have earned a lot at the cost of repression of the working class. Thus, their economy relies on sucking others' blood in letter and spirit.

In the play under analysis, the Berlings are selfish and individualistic. It is the capitalistic and money-oriented philosophy of Berlings' company that has created huge gulf between the rich and the poor. The rich have no concern for the poor who are forced to work in their factories. Here, Arthur Berling has been selfish and inhuman towards his employees who have not been given due reward for their services in his plants. The play under discussion revolves around the pitiable condition of Miss Eva Smith who has to face a lot of sufferings only because





she demands her right to decent wages of her honest and dedicated services for Berlings. Her demand for small amount of increase in her salary is met with strong resistance from Arthur Berling who sacks her and sends her to a cold world. Consequently, she has to undergo unbearable mental and physical torture at the hands of those who can blackmail her by keeping her body and soul together. Arthur Berling shows how inhuman and selfish the capitalistic approach is as it does not care for human values and human rights.

The very first speech that Arthur Berling makes in order to guide the couple on their engagement night, shows selfish and anti-social attitude of capitalists who never want to share their resources with the helpless working class. According to Arthur Berling: 'But the way some of these cranks talk and write now, you'd think everybody has to look after else, as if we were all mixed up like bees in a hive-- community and all that nonsense'. There is strong vein of individualization. Arthur Berling, in these lines, dislikes the idea of socialism which makes it binding on the rich to share their resources with the poor.

The aforementioned lines show the mentality of the heavy pocketed Berlings who despise helping others, for as capitalists, they have only learnt in their life how to earn more and more, without caring for others. Arthur Berling is self-important, arrogant and ambitious person. He wants to get knighthood on the basis of his strong economy. He believes that man should put himself first and he should not think of those who are less fortunate to have much money. He believes that his power can overcome law. He is totally against socialism which is threat to his power as a capitalist. He has no guilt for his crime in sending an innocent girl into pitfall. He is not afraid of disaster as he believes that his economic prosperity would save from any catastrophe. His selfishness inspires him to arrange matrimonial relation with his rival Crofts who are also capitalists. The words of Inspector Goole are as: 'Because what happened to her may have determined what happened to her afterwards, and what happened to her afterwards may have driven her to suicide. A chain of events'. Goole explains the real factor behind the tragedy of Miss Eva Smith who gets into troubles after getting sacked by Arthur Berling.

Sheila Berling, too, presents the same individualistic and selfish approach towards others as she carries the same germs as are observed in the rest of the capitalist family. She wants to influence others because she suffers from superiority complex which compels her to feel jealous





of others if anyone feels excited or happy. She can't face the intimate expression between one of the administrative staff and Eva Smith. It is lack of social ability on the part of Sheila Berling who cannot bear stable position of a poor girl whom she manages to get fired from her position. This act on the part of Sheila Berling shows individualizing attitude of capitalists who keep the poor at arm's length lest they should try to equal them. This individualizing approach shows that capitalism is devoid of all humanitarian side of life.

Eric Berling is also self-centered in his approach towards the poor classes as he knows how to use money as power in order to get sensual pleasure from the downcast people. Although, he is in his early twenties, yet he steals money from his father's savings and uses it for his drinks and sexual objectives. Being a youth in age, he feels worried about future of the girl whom he has impregnated, but it is too late to compensate for the loss he causes for Miss Eva Smith. The character of Eric Berling shows lack of morality on the part of the capitalists because they do not care for human rights. Financial greed makes Eric blind to reason and he becomes too sensual to look for Miss Eva's future. Hence, with relevance to Eric Berling, it is his economic superiority which works well to subjugate Miss Eva Smith physically and mentally. She loses her virginity and her life, afterwards.

Individualistic approach of capitalism in *An Inspector Calls* does have strong impact on those who belong to the proletariat class. Here, the play under study revolves around the repressive approach of capitalists on the poor girl like Miss Eva Smith who is faced with harsh realities of life. The worst point which needs to be focused is that the play revolves around two families who victimize the same girl time and again in order to keep up their head above lower working class. It shows how capitalism is deathly blow to the poor who work day and night to favour the interests of capitalists.

Individualizing approach towards life divides the life on the earth into heaven and hell. It becomes a safe haven for those who are heavy pocketed like Berlings and Crofts and a hell for all those who are empty pocketed like Eva Smith. Hence, some are there to enjoy its fruit, whereas some others are constantly deprived of its fruit. The world becomes a blind alley for a poor Eva Smith who finds no place and no refuge to get rid of atrocities of the bourgeois Berlings and Crofts who shower their inhuman passion on a parentless, shelterless and jobless





Eva Smith. Miss Eva Smith, despite being a loyal and hardworking worker, is sacked from her service only because she wants bit increase in her salary. It shows that capitalism does not make people good social human beings; rather, it deprives them of their right to decent life. The story of Eva Smith is a fine example to explain unequal relationship between employer and employee relation. The employers tend to be individualist and anti-social in their actions and exercise the same on those who are unlucky enough to work in their business empire.

The play under study shows that individualization is transferred from elders to their siblings. The selfishness which springs from parents breeds in other members of the same family. It means capitalism is a system which covers all who are directly or indirectly blessed with its fruits. Here, in the play under investigation, the selfish attitude of father, Arthur Berling, is transferred into the blood of all who are under his guardianship. Sheila Berling and Eric Berling do have the same bent of mind as is held by their father, Arthur Berling. Though, in the end of the play, Sheila Berling and Eric Berling do have feelings of repentance and sympathy for Miss Eva Smith, but it is too late because both of them have driven her to commit suicide. The episode at Milwards where Miss Eva Smith works with her changed name shows that individualism deprives the poor of their right to life. The divide between the high and the low is too deep to create scope for accepting others as equal human beings. Sheila Berling cannot bear someone like Miss Daisy Renton to have favourable prestige at Milwards. This creates jealousy in her minds, so she threatens the company to remove her from her place in order to satisfy her ego.

Individualization makes people selfish and opportunist. Upper class lacks in genuine sympathy for those who are by chance less fortunate to have the same economic status as is enjoyed by the upper class Berlings and Crofts. It tends to maintain vast gulf between the rich and the poor. The same gulf keeps lower classes dependent on the upper classes that blackmail and misuse them on the pretext of helping them. Economic disparity makes one class dependent on the other. Hence, people like Eric Smith and Gerald Croft use their pocket to suppress the downtrodden classes. Being grown up in selfish atmosphere, Sheila Berling and Eric Berling influence others, and influence them badly. Eric Berling gets in touch with a helpless girl and attempts to quench his sexual thirst. He impregnates her and the same becomes final blow to her life. Failing to get any help from any source, she commits suicide. Her suicide shows that





individualization leaves the rich to prosper and the poor to suffer. Economic dependency becomes the biggest hurdle for working class in this play.

Events in the play under analysis show lack of sympathy in the bourgeois class which thrives on individualism. The spirit of individualism gives a crack in social set up as is seen in case of Eva Smith who is faced with no genuine and selfless sympathy from any quarter, whatsoever. The same individualistic approach weakens relationships among individuals and groups who fail to see each other from emotional point of view. Lack of emotions breeds a wall between them. The wall gets stronger and higher when it involves economy which makes people self-centered and selfish. Hence, society is divided into groups which do not get united at all. The needy fail to get any assistance from the rich who always blackmail and repress the poor. The case of Miss Eva Smith is an example of capitalist brutality.

Conclusion

Findings of the research confirm the presence of individualization of capitalistic trends in J.B. Priestley's *An Inspector Calls*. The play is full of such examples, incidents and dialogues which portray individualization exerting negative impact on the proletariat and the vice versa. Individualistic trend destroys Miss Eva Smith at the hands of Berlings and Crofts who lack in social and humanitarian approach to life. Individualizing approach is deeply rooted in the psyche of all members of the two manufacturing families. Their life revolves around economic interests. The bourgeois families i.e., the Berling and the Croft attempt to safeguard their economic interest via matrimonial bond between Gerald Croft and Miss Sheila Berling. The early advice of the guardian reflects individualizing approach on the part of the capitalists who prefer their economic interests to human welfare. Arthur Berling, Sheila Berling, Eric Berling and Sybil Berling, all members of the family suffer from selfishness, and anti-social approach, keeping the poor like Miss Daisy Renton at an arm's length. The bourgeois individualize a girl to keep up status quo in the society. Sheila Berling doubles the same capitalist approach by getting Miss Eva Smith sacked at Milwards. Eric Berling uses money as weapon to trap and use a helpless and shelterless girl whom he makes pregnant, thus sending her to deathbed. Sybil Berling, too, becomes antagonistic towards a deserving girl and refuses her the charity, depriving her right to socialize herself in society. Hence, all members of the same family contribute towards the death





of Miss Eva Smith by individualizing the poor working-class girl.

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