

# **Marxist Reading of Political Cinema: A Case Study on Costa-Gavras' Films**

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## **I. Introduction**

It may seem to be problematic to draw the relationship between cinema and politics, but in fact, both cinema and politics are components of a society's culture. A society is made up of its current and historical events with other social conditions and when these are portrayed in a cinema in order to inform or to agitate the spectator that then the cinema becomes political where ideology and politics are often deliberately interconnected. Thus we stand with the cinema before an exposition of the world. Cinema is a form of arts and science. It is a means of communication. It is a part and parcel of a society's culture which amalgamates its ideas and ways of behaving, language and literature, music, ideas about what is bad and good, and ways of working. It is considered to be a visual medium that tells us stories and most often is used to expose reality. It lets us think remarking itself as a complex instrument of representation as Jean-Luc Godard remarks at the end of his *Histoire(s) du Cinéma*, a "form that things". I must say that the background to Costa-Gavras' debate was the worldwide social and political upheavals of the 1960s that of simultaneously influenced by Latin American film movement that started in the 1960s-70s, termed as Third Cinema which denounces neocolonialism and the capitalist system. In a result, the films of Costa-Gavras reject the view of cinema as a medium for personal expression, but rather it appeals to the masses by presenting the truth.

So, this paper is going to focus on Marxist reading (as it is directly related to the social and political structure of the society) of the overt political films of Costa-Gavras namely, *Z*, *The Confession*, *State of Siege*, *Missing*, *Hanna K.*, *Music Box* concerning with social and political issues under capitalist system that of derived from repressive ideology comprising the motive of power, the concept of false consciousness, capitalism, classism, patriotism, rugged individualism, and commoditization signifying the process of use value, exchange value, and sign-exchange value.

### **1.1 Marxism in the Films of Costa-Gavras**

Marxist philosophy is an eminent example of practical philosophy. The motivation towards this philosophy has not derived from the credence of Utopia, but rather, this philosophy has derived from the reality of life and society. "For Marxism, getting and keeping economic power is the motive behind all social and political activities, including education, philosophy, religion, government, the arts, science, technology, the media and so on" (Tyson 53-54) which apparently promotes the motive of power, the concept of false consciousness, capitalism, classism, patriotism, rugged individualism, and commoditization signifying the process of use value, exchange value, and sign-exchange value that of are overtly portrayed in the films of Costa-Gavras.

### **1.2 Methodology**

This is a library based research. Moreover, this paper adopts two major methodologies: analysis of historical records and analysis of documents. Analysis of historical records means, "recording of notes, content analysis, tape and film listening and analysis" (Kothari 07). Analysis of document is, "statistical compilations and manipulations, reference and abstract guides, content analysis" (Kothari 07). The data collected through the processes help to reach the target of this paper. This paper depends on the six films directed by Costa-Gavras mentioned earlier and other materials related to it.

### **1.3 Range of the Study**

This paper is going to discuss critically the six political films directed by Costa-Gavras mentioned earlier using the knowledge of political aspects of that time in light of Marxism concerning with the role of ideology- the motive of power, the concept of false consciousness, capitalism, classism, patriotism, rugged individualism, and commoditization signifying the process of use value, exchange value, and sign-exchange value. This paper will also take help from cultural studies. Based on these critical theories, it also tries to show the problems regarding the topic of this paper that is the continuation of social and political, and economic partiality in the name of progress leading the enlightenment vision to a cynical end.

#### **1.4 Design of the Paper**

This paper is divided into five chapters. The first chapter contains the introduction. This chapter introduces the topic and describes the methodology of the research. The second chapter contains the literary theory and the literature review. The third chapter includes the critical analysis of the political films directed by Costa-Gavras and shows almost all the elements of Marxism available in the films. The fourth chapter shows up with arguments regarding the problems caused by the situations shown in the films. Finally, the fifth chapter is the conclusion which concludes this paper with a brief review of the whole paper.

## **II. Literary Theory & Literature Review**

### **2.1 Marxism: Literature Review**

It is true to say that Karl Marx (1818-83) standing at the centre led to establish Marxism as world philosophy, but he was also associated by his very intimate friend, Friedrich Engels (1820-95) who helped Marx in regard of creating almost all theory. It is very evident that V. I. Lenin, Joseph Stalin, Nikita Khrushchev, and Mao Tse-tung played a very important role and contributed deeply to diffuse Marxist theory in the world history. Marxism is so progressive theory that it is always ready to accept any reformation and combination in response to the change of epoch.

In middle of the 18th hundred Karl Marx developed the idea, Marxism which basically says that socialism and communism are the best way to move on, that is the social institutions that he would like to see implemented. Basically, communism which is ultimately based upon classless society and what that means is that we know lower and upper class of the society that Marx proposes that everybody must have equal opportunity were equal means everyone would be in the same social level. So, as we can see that this kind of directly opposes capitalism which is the economic system that we have in the whole world which is based upon individual opportunity or people make their own wealth and it causes the emergence of upper class and lower class system in the society. So, they directly oppose one another and cause chaos which is directly opposed to communism.

In 1848 Karl Marx published *Communist Manifesto* and it is essentially considered all these ideas and all his aims as well as creating the idea that the history of society is a history of class struggle has come from it.

So, based on the discussion earlier, I can say Marxism is a structural (macro) theory which argues that we are all controlled by society. It is a conflict theory which argues that society is characterized by disagreement and conflict between social groups. This conflict is particularly between the rich and the poor, the powerful and the powerless. Marxists argue that the way societies produce the goods they need (mode of production) affects how a society treats its people. They argue our society is capitalist, where a small number of people own power, and the forces of production; factories, tools etc. In a result, the majority of people works for the reach and remains subservient to them. The wealthy owners (ruling class) make loads of money (profit) while the workers (subject class) live in relative poverty. This capitalist system, argue Marxists is unfair. Capitalism is unfair because the social relations of production (relationship between the powerful and the powerless) are exploitative. Marx wanted capitalism to end in a revolution by the subject class and be replaced by communism where everyone is equal.

Because the capitalist infrastructure is so unfair, something has to exist to convince the masses that it is fair and right. This system is called superstructure. The superstructure includes law, education, family, religion, and media. All types of repressive ideologies that con us all into thinking that capitalism is fair and to prevent revolution. Rebellion and revolution would hurt the ruling class so they control the superstructure and make it work to protect them.

According to Marx, social change occurs in a revolutionary way. When the exploited masses (subject class) react violently against their oppression by the rich ruling class, some modern Marxists called Neo-Marxists argue that the capitalist state forces the masses to accept exploitation in two ways. The one is Ideological State Apparatus: using superstructure like religion and media in order to promote the motive of power, the concept of false consciousness, rugged individualism, classism, commoditization, and capitalism to distract us from our exploitation and to control our thinking; and the other one is Repressive State Apparatus: using physical force to control the masses and protect capitalism and therefore the ruling class.

In his Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory, Cuddon gives us an account of Marxist criticism as the following:

Karl Marx (1818-83) and Friedrich Engels (1820-95) were primarily concerned with economic, political and philosophical issues and worked out explanations of the capitalist theory and mode of production.... However, Marxist principles and attitudes and modes of thought and inquiry have been adapted to create a Marxist theory of literature: what it has been, and what it might and, perhaps, should be. The Marxist critic (who tends to be primarily interested in content) writes from the definite standpoint of Marx's philosophical ideas, and from his view of history in which the class struggle is fundamental, or in terms of socio-historical factors.

Much earlier Marxist criticism has been devoted to a reconstruction of the past on the basis of historical evidence in order to find out to what extent a text (say, a novel) is a truthful and accurate representation of social reality at any given time (492-493).

This concept of Marxist criticism incorporates several aspects namely economic, political and philosophical issues, and moreover the reconstruction of past on the basis of historical evidence and accurate representation of social reality which evolve around the reading of the political films of Costa-Gavras where the issues of the economic, politics, and social reality based on historical evidence are principal. So, it is very evident that watching the political films of Costa-Gavras, it is understood that the basic assumption of Marxist criticism is that those who control a society's economics also control or largely influence the society's cultural and intellectual products.

## **2.2 Marxism & Film**

From the essay, "Marxism and film" written by Chuck Kleinhans it is known that although Marx never went to the movies, Marxism has significantly affected filmmaking by politically committed directors as well as shaped the critical and historical analysis of film in aesthetic, institutional, social, and political terms. Fundamental Marxist concepts such as ideology profoundly inform most contemporary theories of and approaches to the analysis of individual films as well as to cinema as a social institution. Marxism fuses several different sources and types of concern. From English political economy, Marx developed his understanding of the economic foundation as fundamentally shaping (though not immutably determining) the social superstructure. From German philosophy, by inverting Hegelian idealism into a materialism that saw the world as historical and dynamically changing, Marx studied capitalism and capitalist societies as always in process.

So, it can be said that the political films of Costa-Gavras served as social institution as those of the films reject the view of cinema as a vehicle for personal expression, but rather each of the films appeals to the masses by presenting the truth and social reality. Marx and Engels did not write a full-fledged aesthetics, but their comments on art (almost exclusively on literature) can be synthesized into a view which validates the Western classics and upholds a broadly construed realism in representation and narration (Morawski 1973; Solomon 1973).

## **III. Content Analysis**

In this chapter, the political films of Costa-Gavras mentioned earlier will be analyzed critically and how those of the films contain the elements of Marxism concerning with the role of ideology depicting the motive of power, the concept of false consciousness, capitalism, classism, patriotism, rugged individualism, and commodification signifying the process of use value, exchange value, and sign-exchange value will be focused.

### **3.1 Z**

*Z* is a French language political thriller directed by Costa-Gavras based on the 1966 novel of the same name by Vassilis Vassilikos. The film is a fictional representation of the facts surrounding the assassination of democratic Greek politician Grigoris Lambrakis in 1963, role played by Yves Montand as the Deputy of a pacifist organization who wants to bring about peace to society by removing social and political injustice. The main plot of this film is following the assassination of the Deputy, a magistrate is assigned to investigate to expose the truth while the government officials attempt to conceal their misdeeds.

The film is deeply concerned with Marxist criticism as it bears the economic and political issues along with the devotion to a reconstruction of the past on the basis of historical evidence in order to find out social reality.

In the film, *Z* the role of ideology which is a belief system is exposed overtly. Not all ideologies are equally productive and desirable. The story development of *Z* evolves out of the idea of undesirable ideology which promotes repressive political agendas in order to ensure their acceptance by creating false consciousness among the citizenry. At the very beginning of the film the Chief of police who represents the oppressive government says they believe in democracy while he considers other -isms as ideological illness like mildew, a fungal disease of plant can be prevented by spraying with copper sulfate, a poisonous blue chemical. This type of thought signifies the motive of holding the power to have control over everything and not to let anybody to grab it which ultimately denounces the social and political equity. It seems the ruling party shown in the film uses the concept of power as the surface phenomena to rule. They think only having the power they can do anything they want. In concerned with false consciousness, the ruling party wants to aware the farmers who are essentially the working class people about the ideological illness depicted as mildew metaphorically in this film to make them understand falsely as they, the working class people often did not realize that they may be manipulated by the bourgeoisie or the ruling class. Another thing regarding the false consciousness is the idea of freedom shown in this film. Freedom means the stability of money which establishes the capitalist point of view in the film nurtured by the ruling class. According to the speech delivered by the Deputy in nuclear disarmament

rally in the film, there are no good schools, hospitals but half of the budget goes for military expenditures which results in anti-communism and developing autocracy by the intervention of foreign countries in order to make capital (profit) providing them with arms. It is a clear evidence of rugged individualism by which the government only thinks of itself instead of whole. Moreover in this film the element of commoditization exists. It is found in the character of the photojournalist, the assassin of the Deputy, and the witness, Nick. Commoditization is the act of relating to objects or persons in terms of their exchange value or sign-exchange value. In the film, the photojournalist along with the magistrate looks for the truth, as it, he believes will make a great front page story and make his newspaper famous. On the other hand, both the assassin and the witness, Nick are very proud to be the part of the incident thinking they will have become popular after the photo and name published in the newspaper. Besides, the function of RSA is also visualized in the film showing the charge of police force on the protesters while protesting the Deputy's death on the street beside the hospital. Finally, the death of seven witnesses, the ban of trial, the reinstatement of the government officials, the emergence of military regime, and the suspension of the magistrate lead the situation to a cynical end.

### **3.2 The Confession**

*The Confession* is a 1970 French-Italian film directed by Costa-Gavras. It is based on a true story. The film is a representation of a fictionalized account of the events surrounding the arrest and solitary confinement of the faithful top ranking civil servant, Communist Artur London, role played by Yves Montand along with other fellow communists and how they were made to confess to treason that they never committed though.

Although it may seem Costa-Gavras makes a detour from his movement against the right-wing dictatorship to filming the facts of Soviet regime, he does not intend to expose anti-communism, but rather, he wants to reveal the detestable situation caused by totalitarianism.

Totalitarianism is a form of government in which all societal resources are monopolized by the government. The total control over the population that results in the misuse of power shown in the film. According to it, the state absorbs all the power alone. The state casts aside all who do not serve its purpose. This attitude refers to the concept of rugged individualism depicting the government's focus on only its purpose instead of on the well-being of the citizen.

Here in the film we see how the government officials are made to confess forcibly to treason what they never committed which overtly decries the political equity according to Marxism. The Czechoslovakian conservative Communist Party acts just as like as the Nazis in disguise of socialism and communism whereas communism never allows any unrighteous deed to the people of the society. Indeed this film is a reconstruction of the past on the basis of historical evidence.

Finally the film urges true communism hoping for Lenin to wake up which stands as positive point of view that Marxism supports.

### **3.3 State of Siege**

*State of Siege* is a 1972 French film directed by Costa-Gavras. The story of this film is based on a true incident. The film is a representation of fictionalized account of the events surrounding the abduction and the execution of a US embassy official Dan Mitrione, role played by Yves Montand as Philip Michael Santore. Here in the film, Mr. Santore is one of the civil employees of a US agency for International development while he is in real an advisor to the police department and interior affairs of developing countries who gives training on torture techniques and shares repressive ideas to make them oppressive to Communists, guerrillas in order to keep civil order in disguise of a communication specialist on behalf of his imperialist country to keep the motif power stable. Thus he is abducted and executed by Tupamaro guerrillas. It also signifies the struggle between the repressive government of Montevideo and the Tupamaro guerrillas.

The film evolves heavily the idea of capitalism, classism maintaining superstructure. The funeral ceremony of Mr. Santore the absence of the priests, and university bodies symbolizes the denouncement of the acts committed by him. It shows the lower class people of the society are supposed to suffer from malnutrition while at the same time the upper class people who live in big cities are meant to have nutritious food and not supposed to get affected by any disease which symbolizes the classism as well as capitalism showing the power of money and privilege. On the other hand the agency for International development tries to testify them as a part of promoting development for agriculture, mining, education, the forest industry, and scientific research by intervening in the different sectors of industry exist in the developing countries in the name of cooperation and progress maintaining and holding the superstructure formula in the society. Moreover, it is known that every single day by drinking beer, taking an aspirin, washing the teeth, cooking in an aluminum pot, using a refrigerator or heating a room the fellow citizens of the developing country contribute to the economy of the imperialist country which ultimately creates capital (profit) for the imperialist country. The liberalism of imperialist countries causes the industrial revolution and originates the greed for money. They intervene with the affairs of a developing country by giving unanimous aid in order to keep their authorization stable. Finally,

they are actually waging war between social classes and promoting fascism, and torture in the name of civil order, freedom, and democracy.

### **3.4 Missing**

*Missing* is a 1982 American drama film directed by Costa-Gavras. The film is about the disappearance of an idealistic writer, Charles Horman who used to write for FIN- a left-wing newspaper during the US backed military coup in 1973 in Chile, and the searching of his father along with his wife for him.

The film depicts the repressive interest of an imperialist country's on a socialist country in order to break down socialism and emerge imperialism by backing up a military coup. It symbolizes the rule of autocracy denouncing democracy. The film also signifies the role of RSA validating shooting at site on the street during curfew. The involvement of only high official from military in the ruling class promotes the class struggle and oppressive acts towards the powerless. For being captured only for being a left-wing signifies the domination of right-wing politics and anti-communism ideology which ultimately threatens social and political equity. For Marxist criticism it can also be said that power is a curvy system and who are used to staying ahead of it means good to the ruling class. In the film, the biggest political imprisonment in the stadium depicts repressive political agendas made by the ruling class. After all even when the father Horman put charges against the high officials of his own country which always is very eager to protect the civil rights of its people with complicity and negligence in the death of his son, the Justice Department kept the issue unresolved and classified as the secret of the state which again establishes the will of the ruling class.

### **3.5 Hanna K.**

*Hanna K.* is a 1983 drama film directed by Costa-Gavras. This film is about Hanna Kaufman's personal life, a child of Holocaust survivors and an American Jewish immigrant to Israel who is a lawyer by profession and a Palestinian, Selim Bakri who is eager to regain his family possession legally with the help of Hanna. It is very evident that the depiction of Hanna's personal life, dividing her affection among three men- the attorney, her ex-husband, Selim and her child puts the political situation in a shade. Nevertheless the film shows some aspects relating to Marxism such as equal civil right, true consciousness and the motive of applying power on powerless.

At the very beginning of the film we can see that the Jews of Israel starts occupying the area of Muslim Palestinians denouncing their civil rights. Selim is very righteous to take back his family possession but the government does not want to get Selim back what he rightfully inherits. This is how the government promotes the social injustice to the actual citizen of the country. Moreover, because of the Jewish occupation in Palestine powered by the imperialist countries, the original geography of the country has been changed. This is why it is very problematic for Hanna to find out Selim's family home. Because of the social inequality, whatever the situation is after the occupation the decision is always made against the Palestinian Muslims. Thus how it represents the social and political partiality.

### **3.6 Music Box**

*Music Box* is a 1989 film directed by Costa-Gavras. The story of this film is about a daughter defending her father, a Hungarian-American immigrant who is accused of committing war crimes. The film also explores the struggle of the daughter to uncover the truth. The film is kind of courtroom thriller and merely evolves the idea of Marxism, but rather, it is a film about the intimate relationship between father and children. Nevertheless during the trial I found some elements related to Marxist criticism such as racism, the exploitation of minority-Jewish people, and finally a reconstruction of the past on the basis of historical evidence in order to find out the social reality of that time which ultimately helps Mrs. Talbot uncover the truth. Besides, it is also shown in this film how money and power can falsify anything they want according to the will of bourgeoisies or the ruling class. However, finally, the most important thing of this film is fighting against emotional state of mind (which actually in some cases becomes the victim of false consciousness) in order to gain the moral courage to face and establish the truth by choosing the right thing out all of the confusions.

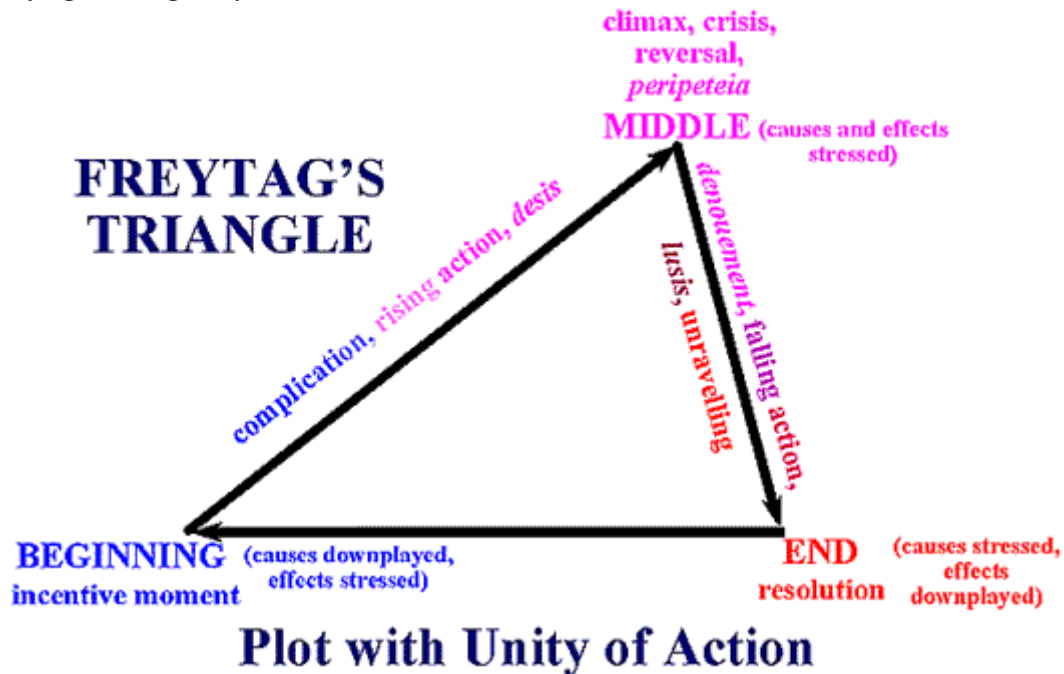
## **IV. Argument**

### **4.1 Gavras' Point of View**

After watching several films directed by Costa-Gavras I assume that the basic point of view of Gavras in regard of making overt political films revolves around the motive of power as because politics is completely based on and related to power, and power makes the world round. Power is the most important issue in our society. The one who has power has the ability to do good or bad things whenever he or she wants. Actually we all have power, I think. But the ultimate fact is power is such a thing which is only used against the powerless. For example, upper-class has power over middle-class and middle-class has power over the lower-class who are in general powerless. This pyramid of power is politics. The role of power shown in the films of Gavras is kind

of liberalism to the ruling class which originates greed for money, capitalism, rugged individualism and all other repressive terms. Marxism, a non-repressive ideology acknowledges these terms as products of undesirable repressive ideology which only promotes oppressive political agendas in order to ensure their acceptance among the citizenry maintaining superstructure in society and to keep the role of power stable. Because according to the essay “**Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses**” by Lois Althusser it can be said that as any building, the upper floors would not stay up unless the base is stable and strong enough. This edifice metaphor allows to clearly showing the relation of either autonomy or reciprocal action between the base and the superstructure resulting in the implementation of ISA and RSA. This how the political films of Gavras present the role of power as the mother of all undesirable ideologies thematically with the reconstruction of the past based on the historical evidence.

#### 4.2 Freytag's Triangle: Cynical Resolution



(Source: Google Image)

Freytag's triangle is a dramatic structure. This triangle is composed of four segments namely rising action, climax, falling action, and resolution. Rising action is related to series of incidents developing the plot toward the point of greatest interest. Climax is the turning point of the story of the drama. Falling action is the conflict within the incidents which may contain a moment of final suspense. Finally, resolution is where the conflicts are resolved. According to this dramatic structure the political films of Gavras follow almost all segments of the triangle. But it is seen that almost all the films by Gavras mentioned earlier merely meet the requirement of the resolution where the conflicts shown in the films are supposed to be resolved. Instead of having resolved the endings of the films evolve cynical situation by establishing the will of ruling class over the powerless. For example, in *Z*- the emergence of military regime, murder of the witnesses, suspension of the judge, the reinstatement of the convicted government officials, and banning on several things opposed to military regime; in *The Confession*- fall of true socialism and communism; in *State of Siege*- a replacement of another US official in the same place even after the execution of Mr. Santore by Tupamos guerrillas; in *Missing*- the cancellation of the suit filed by Mr. Horman against the US high officials with complicity and negligence in the death of his son and remaining classified as a secret of the state; in *Hanna K.*- the escape of Selim from the house of Hanna in spite of being innocent just only because he is Muslim; in *Music Box*- the miserable breakdown of the relationship between daughter and father after the truth is revealed leads the central character to nurture hatred towards her father's falsification of fact.

#### V. Conclusion

This paper is an attempt to give a Marxist reading of political cinema especially on the overt political films directed by Costa-Gavras. In order to do so a great deal of knowledge about the theory, Marxism, and the nature and the basic theme of political films are necessary. In the second chapter of this paper an account of a brief discussion about the theory, Marxism and the relationship between Marxism and film are shown which

have been used in this paper to analyze the political films of Costa-Gavras. The third chapter contains the critical analysis of the films from Marxist point of view. The fourth chapter contains the argument regarding the point of view of Costa-Gavras in regard of making political films and seeks the mismatch with the resolution of Freytag's triangle showing examples taken from the films. It is very evident that the message Gavras tries to convey is the message of humanity and equality using the concept of socialism and communism in almost every film of him which apparently urges Lenin as well to wake up to hold back the falling socialism. The political films of Costa-Gavras are representation of social reality with an account of the reconstruction of the past on basis of historical evidence and protest against the tyrannical power of the ruling class and the capitalist society which is controlling everything around us. We must remember that all of us are human being and humanity towards all is more important than the supremacy of one individual group or people. It is humanity which should be the code of life rather than the urge to dominate and manipulate others. Before I finish I would like mention something about dignity. Now a day false dignity is nurtured by the ruling class, but I want to ask what actual dignity is. Does dignity lie in the motive of power and designation or in the implementation of the repressive political agendas? No. The true dignity lies in worshipping the ultimate truth, the dignity that serves humanity with its power.

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