Exploring the Relationship Between Paton's Ideology and His Context

Abstract:
In this article I intend to highlight some of the main ideas in Paton’s ideology in order to understand what made him an outstanding person in the white minority during the apartheid period; it is also intended to highlight what were the basic principles of his commitment to his society and to the defence of equality between races. To go more deeply into Paton’s ideology, I am going to pay attention to two central aspects that show what he considered crucial to create a better society: the importance of religion as a basis for dignity and freedom, and the defence of human rights. This paper will also emphasize that his use of language appeared clearly connected with a marked social reality, whose main characteristics were the supremacy of the white minority and the oppression of the black population. In other words, in Paton’s literary production language and society cannot be separated since language creates and builds the social situation; the author transmits his experience through language. In this sense, there is a clear interrelationship between society, ideology, culture and language use.

Zusammenfassung:

Alan Paton was committed to the socio-political situation of his country. For this reason, his intention in his writings and his public speeches was to create a social consciousness and to oppose the dominant ideology in South Africa in his historical moment. His use of language appeared clearly connected with a marked social reality, whose main characteristics were the supremacy of the white minority and the oppression of the black population. For this reason, when we talk about Paton’s literary production language and society cannot be separated. Language is realized through text;¹ this implies that texts do not have intrinsic meanings since meaning emerges according to the way texts are used in social contexts.

Paton’s writings, like any other text, were produced by an author who lived in the political and social world of his time, and we get a better understanding of his works by taking context into account (Beard, 2001: 3). The relationship between text and context is such that we can predict context from text and text from context.

Language is the instrument Alan Paton uses to narrate a historical situation, i.e., language creates and builds the social situation; it is through language that the author transmits his experience. Although Paton decides to write in a European language, English, this language has an African resonance since he transmits African values, and he places the readers in an African context. At the same time, Alan Paton presents real African situations through this language, in such a way that we get to know the African reality better.

Paton’s use of language rebuilds certain historical and social realities that marked his life. In this sense, his use of language is very effective because he transmits to the readers of his time and those of any other historical period a real situation. When the author transmits this message he tries to make the reader conscious of the disasters that took place in the apartheid period. His intention is to point out that through ethical actions the evils of the whole apartheid period will never be repeated.

As a writer, the author becomes an authority and transmits the political, social and cultural facts that really took place in the society of his time through an expressive language. Paton used language to reflect the social situation he lived in, which allowed him to draw the texts he produced

¹ The word text is used in linguistics to refer to any passage, spoken or written, of whatever length, that does form a unified whole. [...] A text may be spoken or written, prose or verse, dialogue or monologue. It may be anything from a single proverb to a whole play, from a momentary cry for help to an all-day discussion on a committee. A text is a unit of language in use. It is not a grammatical unit, like a clause or sentence; and it is not defined by its size. (Halliday and Hasan, 1976: 1)
closer to the context of the reader. Consequently, he drew the reader into a dialogue with the issues of the culture of the time, into the ‘cultural dialogue’ of apartheid South Africa. In other words, there is an interdisciplinary dialogue between Paton’s literary works and the context surrounding them. For this reason, it can be said that his writing was generated by his environment, and in writing or speaking, language was the tool Paton had to create and build the social situation surrounding him. From 1948, life in South Africa was controlled by the apartheid system. The African National Congress and the National Party, founded almost at the same time (1912 and 1914 respectively) fought for a long time from 1920 onwards. The Nationalists deprived black people of land and political rights, that is why black people started the Defiance Campaign in 1952, which is mentioned in Ah, But Your Land Is Beautiful and the tragic 1960 campaign, which ended with many people dying in Sharpeville. Certain similarities can be found between the African nationalism and the political ideas of the Nazis. As Sparks (1990: 163) declares: “Apartheid and National Socialism both arose from the same witches’ cauldron of national grievance and economic depression”. Racial segregation was present at all levels of South African society: there were separate sections for blacks in the post office, at the banks, at the hospitals and in the shops. Black children went to different schools, did different jobs and were buried in different cemeteries. Segregation became a national principle and not just a social practice. Sparks (1990: 214) comments what follows:

Apartheid is both cause and effect. The ethnocentrism that gave rise to it flourishes within it, since in a compartmentalized society, people of different race and language groups have no real contact with one another or any sense of what is in the other’s heart and mind.

During the apartheid period, the governments introduced oppressive, discriminatory, exploitative and humiliating measures. Public properties belonged to the white government and the separation between the countryside and the cities was significant. For almost 50 years, the black

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2 Some of this depravation took place before the Nationalists came to power in 1948.
3 The nationalism that had a good deal in common with Nazism was not the patriotic nationalism of a body like the ANC, striving for liberation from the shackles of oppression – this is often referred to as “African nationalism” – but the limited, exclusive and racist ‘nationalism’ of the Nationalist government, the apartheid regime. Many of the early cabinet ministers in this government had in fact been supporters of Nazism during World War 2.
4 The cities were in many ways more prosperous than the countryside, but there were very many blacks and a great deal of poverty in the cities, and there were many rich white farmers in the countryside.
population in South Africa suffered oppression and exploitation and those in favour of apartheid believed in this segregated way of organizing society as a divine right. As Van Wyk (1994: 1520) says:

*Apartheid has its origins as much in racism as in an early collusion between state and mines to ensure cheap black labour while depriving blacks of the rights and facilities to resist this exploitation.*

By the context of culture, following the definition coined by the anthropologist Malinowski (1923, 1935), is understood the broad sociocultural environment, which includes ideology, social conventions, institutions, etc. Droga and Humphrey (2002: 2) point out that the context of culture has also been related to the notion of social purpose, which is very significant because when talking about Paton’s language, one has to refer to the religious connotations and references to Isaiah, St. Francis, etc. Apart from this, Paton’s language presents constant references to the social connotations of the Freedom Charter, the Immorality Act, etc. Paton’s context of culture was South Africa just before and during apartheid, a historical, political and social reality with very specific characteristics that the author tried to highlight and denounce through his writings. Paton always felt a strong desire to communicate the real situation of South Africa during apartheid, which is clearly characterized by racial segregation and social problems. He decided to show his commitment through his writings (Martínez Lirola, 2002a: 238).

The notion of ideology is important because it is concerned with how individuals experience the world as members of social groups, and how these experiences are, in turn, reproduced through their writing. As Gerot (1995: 3) noted: “Ideology refers to the sum total of our beliefs and values and our understandings of truth, what is right and wrong, and how the world and those in it work”. In this article ideology is understood in the same sense proposed by Fairclough (1992: 87):

*I shall understand ideologies to be significations/constructions of reality (the physical world, social relations, social identities), which are built into various dimensions of the forms/meanings of discursive practices, and which contribute to the production, reproduction or transformation of relations of domination.*

Paton’s ideology was influenced by the social and cultural context surrounding him because his society was characterized by relations of power and domination between social groups; under these circumstances, there were different positions, attitudes, beliefs and perspectives available, i.e. ideology is an essential component in Paton’s life, in Fowler’s words (1981: 26):
An ideology is just a theory, a system of beliefs which has come to be constructed as a way of comprehending the world. No person can engage with the world without the cognitive support of ideology in this sense. Ideology cannot be removed. It can be replaced - by alternative ideology.

Paton was an upholder of human rights; he was a strong believer in human rights and in human harmony and his human qualities were outstanding. His life and his writing were a cry for justice and freedom. The purpose of his life was to support those suffering and to contribute to a better society through his writing and through his public life. All this shows Paton’s innate humanity. He was a man of hope whose commitment can be seen through his voluminous writings and a very dedicated life.

The concept of ideology is closely linked to power because the nature of ideology depends on the power relations in a society; in this sense ideology is understood as “[…] a means of legitimizing existing social relations and differences of power, simply through the recurrence of ordinary, familiar ways of behaving which take these relations and power differences for granted.” (Fairclough, 1989: 2)

By paying attention to the characteristics of the different linguistic choices used by Alan Paton we become aware of the power of the language to influence knowledge, values and social relations, in other words, language and power stand in a particular relationship:

Because of the constant unity of language and other social matters, language is entwined in social power in a number of ways: it indexes power, expresses power, and language is involved wherever there is contention over and challenge to power. Power does not derive from language, but language may be used to challenge power, to subvert it, and to alter distribution of power in the short or in the longer term. (Kress, 1989: 52)

The poles of Paton’s ideology were the following: the negative: the distrust in the institutionalised power; the positive: the belief in the power of love expressed through brotherhood between human beings. A central idea in Alan Paton’s ideology was to denounce what is inhuman in racial separation and, consequently, the defence of individual freedom and of racial equality, he was also concerned with the defence of human rights and the construction of a better society.

As Martínez Lirola (2002b: 8) points out, Paton’s ideology was an essentially Christian one. Christianity was not just a religion for him but a philosophy and a way of living. In his novels there are many references to Christianity, as we can see in the following examples that show Paton’s knowledge of the Bible:

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5 For more information on Paton’s ideology see Martínez Lirola (2002a: 238-241) and Martínez Lirola (in press).
The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because He has anointed me to preach the Gospel to the poor; He has sent me to heal the broken-hearted, to preach deliverance to the captives and recovery to the blind, to preach the acceptable year of the Lord. (1981: 113-114).

- Brothers and sisters, this is the night of the Last Supper. And when the supper was over, Jesus rose from the table, and he put a towel round himself, as I do now in remembrance of him. Then he took a dish and poured water into it, and began to wash the feet of his disciples, and to wipe them with the towel. (1981: 236)

Sometimes in Paton’s novels, the narrator lets us know the author’s ideology through his statements. In the following examples spoken by the narrator, he does not limit himself just to the narration of facts but he also expresses his opinion about them. The narrator knows the reality he is narrating very well, and he evaluates it in a negative way, i.e., he reports an unjust social situation. With the following examples, the narrator expresses his opinion in a categorical way:

I say we shall always have native crime for fear until the native people of this country have worthy purposes to inspire them and worthy goals to work for. For it is only because they see neither purpose nor goal that they turn to drink and crime and prostitution. (1948: 68)

There was no point in imagining that if one had been there, one could have prevented a thing that had happened only because it had not been prevented. It was the pain that did that, that compelled one to these unprofitable thoughts. (1948: 133)

To go more deeply into Paton’s ideology, the following section will pay attention to two central aspects of his ideology that show what he considered crucial to create a better society: the importance of religion as a basis for dignity and freedom, and the defence of human rights.

2.1 The importance of religion as a basis for dignity and freedom

Paton was brought up by very religious parents, who helped him to develop ethical and moral principles that made him very sensitive to the racial conflicts in South Africa. He interpreted the struggle for racial equality as a revolt against the domination of man, against dominating or being dominated (Martínez Lirola, 2002b: 7).

Paton was a man of the Church. He was always in favour of justice and freedom, i.e. he was a defender of civil rights for every human being. He was always a man of hope, who believed in non-violence as a way of challenging apartheid. Paton was always a defender of human rights and a
believer in freedom as a powerful weapon for transformation, he was a 
writer and a fighter. He had faith in a better society, as he writes in the 
following article published in the journal *Reality* in 1976:

> My own faith is that this society can still be changed by work and devotion, 
aided no doubt by external and internal events. This is a faith, and some 
people would say that it has very little ground in reason. But I choose to hold 
it, because if I were to hold the faith that this society can be changed only by 
violence and terror, I would get out and go and live somewhere else. (Paton, 
1976: 17)

One of the main ideas in Paton’s ideology was his concern about brotherly 
love and understanding among people; he was convinced of the 
fundamental goodness of man, though aware of his temporary failings; he 
feared the way to ultimate peace and happiness was in returning morally to the 
“He glorified God in loving his fellows. He hated the power-hungry, 
exercised intelligence and independence, and had faith in the decency, 
tolerance, and humanity of the common man. […]"

Christianity was present in the different aspects of his career (as politician, 
as writer and as teacher). As Levey (2001: 5) noted: “He saw his career as 
an allegory of the Christian way (Alexander, 1994: 394): the mountain of 
which Paton was thinking is of course the holy mountain of God, and the 
journey is his life’s pilgrimage towards that place, which ended in 1988.”

Paton’s ideology can be observed in his literary themes: apartheid, African 
nationalism, the corrupting influence of the white man (i.e., the City), and 
the white man as exploitative profiteer. In his writings and public speeches, 
Paton always called for the restoration of brotherhood and for racial 
conciliation. The social themes Paton used in literature and in his public 
speeches are a fitting continuation of his humanitarian background, and 
even his special tonal effects gain meaning: Paton learned English, Zulu, 
and Afrikaans in that order; and when asked to name the greatest literary 
fluence on him, he responded that it would be the Bible rather than 
Shakespeare or Dickens or Thoreau. Paton represented social attitudes in 
his characters, as Chapman (2003: 232) highlights:

> What guarantees Paton his continuing appeal is not that, as some critics 
have claimed, he offers the bourgeois reader the comfort of change in the 
heart without change in the streets. There is little comfort and much 
desolation in the writing. Rather it is that, quite unashamedly, Paton is a 
compelling storyteller who conveys his social data through persuasively 
archetypal patternings. His characters are types that stand for attitudes in 
society at large; at the same time, he imbues types – in ways that Peter 
Abrahams does not – with sufficient individuality to lend them psychological 
credibility.
Alan Paton promoted the spirit of non-racial democracy and respect for civil rights in South Africa. He showed a compassionate recreation of human lives during the apartheid period. Paton assumed a social responsibility in his novels, in his writings in general, and in his politics. He showed openly his resistance to apartheid politics and his social consciousness was respected in the liberal movement of his time. Paton brought some of the main problems in South Africa (racial, social, political, etc.) to the attention of the world.

Paton showed his vision of reality, his consistent concern for freedom, dignity and for every human being no matter what race or social position they had, which is based on his Christian convictions. During the time Paton was the principal of Diepkloof Reformatory, which was a terrible prison for boys, he transformed the reformatory into a place in which education and freedom were a priority, as Callan (1982: 2) points out:

As a director of a reformatory institution and subsequently in active political life, Paton upheld and ideal of human freedom based on mutual trust and acceptance of personal responsibility. This view of freedom recognizes a man’s need to surmount the limitations of ignorance, illiteracy, or inbred prejudice so that he may develop his inherent human capacities. As principal of a reformatory, Paton relied on increasing freedom as his main instrument of reform.

Paton wanted to move the conscience of the white oppressor and of the reader in general, which involved the promotion of new social values by going against the social habit of domination. In this way, he intended to contribute to the liberation of the oppressed so that a transformation of his society could place place.

Paton pointed out that the civilization of the white man was a destructive force in South Africa because it had destroyed the old tribal system and had replaced it with a set of values and a way of life that neglected traditional African values. For this reason, people living in the City, the Metropolis-namely, Johannesburg- suffered from every kind of crime, vices, hatreds, fears and confusions. Many black citizens migrated to Johannesburg hoping to improve their disrupted lives, to get employment and money, but, on the contrary, it was in Johannesburg that they fell prey of the terrible social situation, and from Johannesburg they never seemed to return.

2.2 The defence of human rights

The upholders of the policy of apartheid believed that each individual should preserve his/her racial differences, and that is why the government’s
duty was to preserve these racial differences in every aspect of human life: education, language, transportation, etc. In Paton’s literary production, he always put forward the view that apartheid could be broken, that it had to be broken because there were many victims of the Group Areas Act, of the Immorality Act, and of every single act based on the division of races. He found apartheid and its acts totally unacceptable on ethical grounds. In this sense, Alan Paton can be considered a man of the people since he made the problems of those in need his own problems through his writings and his committed life, as Colin Gardner highlighted in an article written for Reality in 1988:

Paton’s style is significant because it is the voice of his essential seriousness which binds together not only the whole of his output as a writer but his varied activities and commitments as a public figure, the very project indeed of his admirably unified and dedicated life. (Gardner, 1988: 9)

Paton rejected the idea that people could be relegated to separated pieces of land depending on their race. As a Liberal, he believed in a society in which people are enriched by their differences. In his view, in the road of humanity’s development there was no place for racial separation, in each individual’s way towards the mountain there had to be a place for brotherhood; it diminishes human nature to pay attention to other human beings’ race as a disadvantage instead of an enrichment. On a person’s spiritual pilgrimage though this life, every human being had the same right and the same dignity, in other words, he believed in a common society in which differences among individuals were respected, as he made clear in an article published in Contact in 1958:

That is the long view, not to waste our time in dreaming fantastic dreams of separate and independent societies, but to bend our energies to the building of a common society, with no nationalism except a common South African nationalism, with no discrimination except against all policies that make any person suffer because of his colour and race. (Paton, 1958: 9)

Paton tried to demonstrate the importance of cooperation and reconciliation. He believed that apartheid was a terrible practice and deserved to be condemned. That is why Paton was against any method that concentrated in the destruction of personality because one of the basic

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6 I make reference to the mountain, following Paton’s metaphor used in his autobiography Towards the Mountain (1980). The mountain of which Paton was thinking is the holy mountain of God. As Paton (1989: 1) makes clear in Journey Continued: “This is the second volume of my autobiography. The first part was called Towards the Mountain and the mountain was the holy mountain of Isaiah, where they do not hurt or destroy and towards which some of us spend our lives travelling.”
ideas in his ideology was the recognition of the role and dignity of the individual person. He also believed that South Africa belonged to all the people, which made him pay full respect to the individual and his/her dignity. At the same time, he was sure that relations among people were almost impossible if they were governed by fear. He rejected fear, which seemed to be a constant companion in South Africa, especially during the time in which non-whites suffered from discrimination. In the same way, he was sure that violence was not the solution to any social problem, and he stressed that society could not be changed in that way.

Paton did not forget his strong beliefs during his life, not even when it was dangerous to be against the National Government. He always wanted to bring faith to society through his writings, through his speeches, and through his political life. A constant idea in Paton’s ideology was the construction of a better society in which every citizen had the same human rights and the same opportunities of development, in Callan’s words (1968: 23), in the introduction to The Long View: “Paton then turns to the question of how society is to be restored, and he argues that restoration requires education as well as opportunities for work and the growth of self-respect.”

3. Conclusions

Paton always felt a strong desire to communicate the real situation of South Africa during apartheid, which is clearly characterized by racial segregation and social problems. He decided to show his commitment through his writings and his political activism. For this reason, Paton was a very committed teacher, politician and writer with the socio-political situation of his country. His intention in his writings and political activism was to create a social consciousness and to oppose the dominant ideology of apartheid in South Africa in his historical moment. In this sense, there is a clear interrelationship between society, ideology, culture and language use.

Alan Paton believed in the creation of a common society in which black and white people could live in peace. He did not believe in segregation and rejected the politics of apartheid, which asserted white supremacy based on compulsory segregation. During his career as a writer, as a teacher and as a politician, Paton fought for the reconciliation of the people of South Africa. Due to this, he can be considered a social reformer because Paton was eager to transform the society of his time, to contribute to a better future and to cry for hope.

Apart from this, he made the defence of human rights a central idea in his ideology and in every aspect of his life. He was asking for a new social order that involved the disappearance of racial discrimination and the creation of a social system in which civil rights were respected. These strong beliefs were generated by his environment, his ideology, and his
background. Paton transmitted his experience through language, which appears clearly connected with a marked social reality. Consequently, the language chosen was an expression of Paton’s ideology, with what the author wanted to do with that language, and with the message he wanted to share with the society of his time. Language is the instrument that human beings use to communicate, and to establish social relations because when a human being uses language he/she becomes a social being. In this sense, language is a tool chosen by Paton to get his writings closer to his context of culture, in such a way that a link is established between Paton’s ideology, his use of language and the context surrounding him.

References


