

# Encounter between Objective Violence and Ethics of the Real

Priya Sandhu

Research Scholar,

Panjab University, Chandigarh.

## Abstract

Slavoj Žižek is a cultural theorist whose works addresses themes in psychoanalysis, politics, and popular culture. Through his works he keeps revolutionary political imagination alive. He perceives violence in the normalized symbolic order and thus pits his ideas against the fixation of human life to set rules and regulations. In the light of this ethical position, Žižek confronts the reigning ideology of multiculturalism and postmodernism which works on the ethical imperative to “love thy neighbour”(Violence 64) and in this way, limits the subject to its finite symbolic reality where ‘other’ is always respected. Ethics of the real, on the other hand, shows the possibility that the subject can free itself from the gaze of the Other in order to show fidelity to its own desire. For this reason, Žižek separates ethics from morality. In this paper the encounter between Objective Violence and Ethics of the Real will be explored which is a relationship not based on unity and coherence, but on contradiction and negation.

## Encounter between Objective Violence and Ethics of the Real

In the present times, when political liberalism and free-market economics are the dominating ideas in the world, Slavoj Žižek still keeps revolutionary political imagination alive. To confront the reigning ideology, Žižek argues from a unique theoretical position by mixing Hegelian philosophy, Marxist politics and Lacanian psychoanalysis. This position has got popular these days in academic field by the name of Žižekian studies. Since the range of Žižekian studies is very wide, the present paper would be focusing primarily on the encounter between objective violence and ethics of the Real.

The word ‘violence’ opens those images in mind where perpetrators and victims are visible, for example terrorist attacks, religious riots or domestic violence. The steps which are generally taken to stop this kind of visible violence are promotion of human rights, non-violent ideology or moral education and the heavy use of police or army. Violence, in this way, becomes a taboo in the civilised society. This approach towards visible violence is not acceptable to those thinkers who see it as a reaction against violence that is inherent in the structural arrangement of society. For example, Marxist thinkers focus on the violent aspect of capitalism. Johan Galtung, a Norwegian sociologist, developed the concept of ‘structural violence’ to show the violent systemic functioning of social structure that prevents underprivileged people to fulfill their basic needs by “the repression (of freedom) in the

political case and the exploitation (of well being) in the economic case” (93). Pierre Bourdieu, a French sociologist, extended the concept of capitalism to cultural capital wherein hierarchy of status among people leads to discrimination in any given social field. Bourdieu calls it “symbolic violence” (358).

In a similar manner, Žižek has differentiated visible form of violence, which is named “subjective violence”, from invisible form of violence which is named “objective violence” (*Violence 1-2*). In subjective violence, violent agent can be identified clearly, while objective violence is performed by the socio-political structure lived by its social agents. Žižek argues that subjective violence is generally seen from a non-violent zero level of existence as if there is a normal peaceful state of life which is disturbed by subjective violence. The idea of objective violence negates this perception of non-violent zero level of existence. As Žižek writes, “It (subjective violence) is seen as a perturbation of the ‘normal’ peaceful state of things. However, objective violence is precisely the violence inherent to this ‘normal’ state of things” (*Violence 2*). Two dimensions of objective violence are ‘symbolic’ and ‘systemic’ violence. The idea of symbolic violence is not primarily influenced by Pierre Bourdieu; but by Lacan as well. In symbolic violence, Žižek sees violence in the very form of language used by human beings. As a Lacanian psychoanalyst, Žižek perceives language as a foreign intruder that makes human beings conscious about their role in the symbolic order of reality. Language in this sense makes human beings act as if they have a natural role to play. Žižek’s perception of violence is clearly visible in the following expression:

Language simplifies the designated thing, reducing it to a single feature. It dismembers the thing, destroying its organic unity, treating its parts and properties as autonomous. It inserts the thing into a field of meaning which is ultimately external to it. When we name gold “gold”, we violently extract a metal from its natural texture, investing into it our dreams of wealth, power, spiritual purity, and so on, which have nothing whatsoever to do with the immediate reality of gold. (*Violence 61*)

The other dimension of objective violence is systemic violence which exists in the seemingly smooth functioning of our political and economic system. For Žižek, exploitation within capitalist system is also a form of violence which should not be ignored as if it is a natural catastrophe which is beyond our reach to rectify. As a violent agent cannot be seen in this form of violence, no one takes responsibility for it. For this reason, Žižek has compared it with “ ‘dark matter’ of physics, the counterpart to an all-too-visible subjective violence” (*Violence 2*). For Žižek, the next ethical step that can be taken by human beings to deal with systemic violence is to share responsibility for the sufferings generated by the capitalist system. Like Walter Benjamin and Georges Sorel, Žižek has defended the use of violence for ethical purposes and has refuted the idea that “the renunciation of violence defines the very core of being human...” (*Violence 61*).

Ethics are largely practiced by people on the basis of two tendencies: 1) tendency to stick to social rules and customs, and 2) tendency to transgress these rules so as to express individual's freedom. W.S. Gilbert has mentioned these tendencies as:

That every boy and every gal  
That's born into the world alive  
Is either a little Liberal  
Or else a little Conservative. (qtd. in Lillie 63)

Žižekian understanding of ethics questions both these positions. Žižek perceives violence in the normalized symbolic order and thus pits his ideas against the fixation of human life to set rules and regulations. This anti-conservative attitude does not make him an admirer of liberalism. Žižek criticizes liberalism for its attitude of tolerance of the Other. As he writes, "Today's liberal tolerance towards others, the respect of otherness and openness towards it, is counterpointed by an obsessive fear of harassment. In short, the Other is just fine, but only insofar as his presence is not intrusive, insofar as this Other is not really other..." (*Violence* 41). This attitude inherent in liberalism makes it insufficient for revolutionary politics. An affirmative stance that is needed for revolutionary politics is reduced to a position that resists harassment. For this reason, Žižek developed the concept of ethics of the Real.

'Ethics of the Real' is a concept developed in the light of Lacanian psychoanalysis. Lacan has perceived human personality as a complex of three orders: the Imaginary, the Symbolic and the Real. The Imaginary order signifies a process of identification with an image. An infant's identification of itself with an image is a discovery of its subjecthood. But, paradoxically, it is also a moment when the infant gets alienated from external environment or (m)other. Identification and alienation happen simultaneously. As Lacan has written, "The real object itself isn't the object that you see in the mirror" (*The Ego* 46). In this way, real self that is alienated can be seen as an opponent of alienating image. Further, the Symbolic order signifies the imprisonment of the subject in the symbolic world. Under the influence of structuralism, Lacan sees symbolic world as a system of signs that controls actions of the subject. The actions of the subject, in this way, are seen in the background of existing social relations, and not as an exercise of the subject's free will. As Lacan has written, "The human order is characterised by the fact that the symbolic function intervenes at every moment and at every stage of its existence" (*The Ego* 29). But Lacan is not a strict structuralist who reduces the subject to an effect of language or the Symbolic order. He developed the concept of the Real order which resists the Symbolic order. Here, Lacan differentiates 'reality' from the 'Real'. Reality, for Lacan, is just a symbolic reality that seems meaningful through the effect of language. The Real is that excess which is not controlled by the symbolic reality or in other words, it is not understandable by the existing categories of language. As Lacan has clarified, "...it (real) is radically distinguished from the symbolic and the imaginary- the real is the impossible. Not in the name of a simple obstacle we hit our heads up against, but in the name of logical obstacle of what, in the symbolic, declares itself to be impossible" (*The Other* 123).

In this way, Lacan perceives human personality not in its complete form but with its irreparable void. For this reason, he signifies the subject with the symbol ‘\$’ and not with ‘S’. Žižek takes this concept as a positive one where the subject is not limited to a finite form of symbolic reality but always has an infinite measure of its being. In other words, the subject can free itself from the authority of symbolic reality. By this conception of the subject, Lacan has set an ethical position of the subject not in its relation to symbolic reality but in its relation to its desire. Desire belongs to the Real, and thus the ethics of the Real are also known as the ethics of desire. Žižek finds this ethical position useful for revolutionary politics as the ethics of desire negates the law of symbolic reality. Alenka Zupančič, a Lacanian scholar, writes, “The definition of what we might call the ‘law of desire’ is that desire pays no attention to the ‘laws of nature’, to how the ‘world goes’, or to the ‘forces of circumstances’ ” (119). In the light of this ethical position, Žižek confronts the reigning ideology of multiculturalism and postmodernism which works on the ethical imperative to “love thy neighbour”(*Violence* 64) and in this way, limits the subject to its finite symbolic reality where ‘other’ is always respected. Ethics of the real, on the other hand, shows the possibility that the subject can free itself from the gaze of the Other in order to show fidelity to its own desire. For this reason, Žižek separates ethics from morality. He writes, “Morality is concerned with the symmetry of my relations to the other humans; its zero level rule is ‘do not do to me what you do not want me to do to you’. Ethics, on the contrary, deals with my consistency with myself, my fidelity to my own desire” (Žižek, *Interrogating* 397). The ethics of the Real or the ethics of desire, in this sense, are also the ethics without morality.

These two concepts, ‘objective violence’ and ‘ethics of the Real’ can be studied in dialectical relationship. Dialectical relationship means that the relationship is not based on unity and coherence, but on contradiction and negation. On one hand, symbolic/systemic violence tries to limit the subject to its finitude; on the other hand, ‘ethics of the Real’ perceives the subject with its infinite possibility of becoming something new by unplugging itself from existing symbolic/systemic functioning of its life. In Žižekian philosophy, dialectical relationship is not simply a dialogue of contradictory ideas, but an encounter. A particular case can be used to dismantle familiar universality. Here, the focus is on the exceptional case that functions as a shock to universal experience. In Žižekian words, “...the great art of dialectical analysis consists in being able to pick out the exceptional singular case which allows us to formulate the universality ‘as such’ ” (*Fright* 26).

As a Marxist thinker, Žižek approaches human condition with the concept of ‘ideology’. Žižek has not used this concept in the sense of ‘false consciousness’ that distorts the truth of material conditions. Žižekian use of ideology makes the point that ideology is always a spectral support to human life and there is nothing like post-ideological human existence. Here, reality is not contrasted with illusion, but illusion is being perceived as a necessary support to reality. As Žižek has written, “...the main point is to see how the reality itself cannot reproduce itself without this so-called ideological mystification. The mask is not simply hiding the real state of things, the ideological distortion is written into its very essence” (*Sublime* 25). In this sense, ideology is materialized in the actions of its subject

and cannot be studied in the old naive fashion of recognizable beliefs and values. It means that an intellectual reflection cannot be sufficient to get rid of subjection. For this reason, Žižek admires cinematic art as it stages bodily performances that can help the subject to act differently so as to come out of the existing bodily practices. This function of the art is short-circuiting in its nature as it affects the existing order of human life.

This idea of short-circuiting is also highlighted in Hegelian term 'concrete universal'. The 'concrete universal' is the exception to the normal functioning of universality or 'abstract universal'. The confrontation of these two universalities is the aim of short-circuit approach. In Žižek's words, "This, then, is the Hegelian 'concrete universality': at every stage of the dialectical process, the concrete figure 'colours' the totality of the process, i.e. the universal frame of the process becomes part of (or, rather, drawn into) the particular content" (*Fright* 23-24). Žižek here perceives the dialectical process where 'concrete universality' dismantles the functioning universal order and proves the fragility of the order.

This perception of the fragile symbolic order makes the concept of the subject important in Žižekian approach. As the symbolic order fails to control the subject completely, the subject carries the force to negate the authority of the normalized reality. This act of negating proves that the predicates offered by the symbolic reality to define the subject are inadequate and there is always a possibility that the subject can search for new terms to define itself and to shape the world in new forms. The subject of the real can subtract itself from the normal functioning of life so as to make a gesture of freedom. But, as the Real cannot be symbolized, the subject of the Real identifies itself with the symptom of the Real. The symptom is something that is still not controlled by the symbolic order. The subject's identification with the symptom of the Real is an acknowledgement that the subject is not entirely a castrated being bound to follow the rituals of the social/political life.

The ritualized life, in Žižekian approach, works under the super-ego figure that is called the big Other which, according to Žižek signifies, "...the shared implicit set of beliefs and norms that regulate our interaction" (*Fright* 3). This Lacanian term is used to suggest that the interaction of individuals in the symbolic order is under the authoritative gaze. The big Other is the embodiment of the law that forces individuals to function properly and meaningfully. Žižekian approach attempts to perceive the fictional character of the big Other. It means that the big Other exists only if the subjects believe in its existence. The belief is the only substance, otherwise the big Other does not exist.

Žižek has conceptualized the idea of the big Other in relation to *object a* and desire. The big Other's attempt to prove a symbolic order complete remains unsatisfied because of a lost object (*object a*) that drives the subject's desire. In this sense, *object a* is a lack or void that causes the desire. As *object a* is a missing object from the symbolic reality of the subject, it relates to the Real. So, the subject's desire has its roots in the Real and not in the symbolic reality. In this sense, desire is bound to remain unfulfilled as it attempts to go beyond the symbolic reality. It also signifies that the big Other is

bound to remain impotent in satisfying the real desire of the subject. The complexity of this situation is not the gap between the symbolic reality and the Real, but the role that fantasy plays to postpone the encounter of the Real and the reality. The role of fantasy is to fulfill the gap of the symbolic order by making the subject see the object of desire. The subject's fantasy, thus, makes the object of desire accessible. As far as the subject remains at a distance from the object of desire, fantasy works, but when the subject comes closer to the object, fantasy becomes weak in linking the subject's desire to the object. The moment the fantastical support to reality becomes weak, the Real can emerge in the reality. In this sense, desire links the subject to the big Other by the role of fantasy but the inherent character of desire is to go beyond the control of the big Other.

Thus, Žižekian approach uses Lacanian terms like the big Other, the subject, *object a*, desire etc. to perceive interpellation of the subject in the symbolic order. Žižekian approach perceives the big Other in contrast to the desire of the subject. The big Other attempts to bring the subject under the law while the desire is the desire to transgress law. Here, desire is not used in the sense of hedonists' call for enjoyment. Žižek has criticized the attitude to 'enjoy' in many of his books and articles. He perceives the attitude to enjoy as the super-egoic command in postmodern time. The idea of desire in Žižekian theory is not related to pleasure, but pain. The desire is something that the subject follows even if pain is the result. To follow one's desire means to exercise one's own existential choice to choose one's own desire and to follow it at any cost. Žižekian understanding of ethical subjectivity is related to this subject of desire that does not compromise with the big Other.

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