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Construction of Ideology through Religion as Cultural intermediary in Cho Ramaswamy's "Is God Dead?"

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Abstract

Being a political satirist, social critic and a dauntless journalist, it is no surprise that Cho Ramaswamy has chosen to put forth an unorthodox rhetoric question to the people in a form of a drama: "Is God Dead?" ("IraivanIranthuvittana?") He gave no space to the critics to call him an atheist as he neither blasphemies on the non-existence of God nor does he claim that there is no God. He just said that once there was an Omnipotent called God and that now he is dead. Just like Frederich Nietzsche he accuses people for killing God. Cho Ramaswamy in this play attempts to bring a section of people to lime light who laments all their lives with a question "Is God Dead?"

Through this play, Cho Ramaswamy portrayed the failure of poetic justice, where the evil triumphs over the good just because the good is financially underprivileged. When there is no justice in the society, no doubt, the rhetoric question of Cho Ramaswamy would no longer be his question alone but the voices of the victims of the society. This paper will try to trace how the superstructure is constructed in a society through ideology and how the hegemonic groups create a false consciousness in the mind of people to coerce the power on them through cultural intermediaries.

Keywords: construction, ideology, religion, cultural intermediary, false consciousness, hegemony, nihilism, Ubermensch, existentialism, power, ideological state apparatus.

Construction of Ideology through Religion as Cultural Intermediary in Cho Ramaswamy's "Is God Dead?"

It has been a long debate whether a writer should have a social purpose in his writings. So many movements and number of critics throughout the literary history rose to speak for and against being a writer with social concern. But any honest writer is bound to become a social critic of the society. Criticizing and satirizing the society and the politics are not new to literature. From Aristotle and Plato to Leo Tolstoy and Maxim Gorky various writers have voiced out the injustices in the society at various point of time. Apart from the articulation of voice, there are only few writers who mock at the society to make people realize their mistakes and Cho Ramaswamy is one such writers. His wit and humour make the audience not just to laugh but to think deeper on the society.

Born into a family of lawyers, Cho Ramaswamy was also a lawyer in training; entered theatre; emerged as a Rajya Sabha member and established himself as an editor of a Politico-Satirical magazine "Tughlaq". He was a man of versatility: an actor, a comedian, a playwright, a religious writer and a satirist. He is both popular and notorious for his dauntless satire and fearless criticism. As an article in *The New Indian Express* states he, really "was a man of many hats." (Cho Ramaswamy)

Cho was, indeed, an index journalist to introduce the socio-political issues to his audience through his reputed magazine. His thought process, usually, tend to be far ahead of his time. The magazine *Tughlaq* has a pride moment in the history that during the MISA (emergency period of India in 1971 in the administration of the former Prime Minister of India, Mrs. Indira Gandhi), *Tughlaq* which was under the editorial board of Cho, was the only magazine which got censored and when it

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resumed its publication, it was dared enough to publish the issue with just a black front cover as a mark of protest. In fact, Cho's *Tughlaq* was not only a controversial topic of the past days, even after the demise of Cho, controversies still linger over and around *Tughlaq*. A complaint was filed (during the month of January in 2020) against Mr. Rajinikanth, the Super Star of Kollywood by Dravidian group (a political party in Tamil Nadu) for his comment about Periyar (E.V. Ramaswamy) on the 50th anniversary event of *Tughlaq* magazine. A magazine reports about the event in the following tone: "The actor was speaking at the 50th-anniversary celebration of *Tughlaq*, a Tamil political weekly, when he brought Periyar's stringent criticism against Hindu religion back from death." (asiavilleneuve) Indeed, Mr. Rajinikanth intends to praise Cho's fearlessness on covering Periyar's protest when other magazines fear to tread. But ironically, this speech of Rajinikanth ended up in controversy.

Cho Ramaswamy was not just a journalist but also a politician. He remained a Rajya Sabha MP from November 1999 to 2005. He was proclaimed for his bold articulation during this tenure. His public works were, however, not confined to his being a Member of Parliament. He was more of an activist. He entered into conflict with the former CM of TN, Dr. J. Jayalalitha when she was at pinnacle in her political career and extended his support to DMK/TMK/Rajinikanth to oppose her. Again, when the DMK government turned out to be corrupt, he got DMDK and AIADMK together to oppose the government.

He predicted Narendra Modi's rise as the prime minister even before the BJP openly considered his candidature. His political intelligentsia and judgements were the driving force behind his journalistic career. He is very insightful about politics. He had a deep understanding of the world polity that his political predictions never went wrong. *Rediff on Net* had an interview with him and as a part of it, they questioned him on his opinion about leaders for which he humorously replied that till a crisis comes the stature of the leader is not known. The interview goes like this:

Does that mean we don't have many leaders who have vision and a national outlook? (Rediff on Net)

Yes, it is a fact, but it is happening all over the country. Only during big crises does leadership of vision emerge. Has France got a de Gaulle now? Can even Mitterrand be compared with de Gaulle? Can Clinton be compared with Roosevelt? Can Major be compared with Churchill?

In every country, it is only during huge, big crises that real leadership emerges. Then people forget all other issues, all other ideological differences and look towards the personality, to the strength and moral calibre of one man and place faith in him totally. (In India)

The reply given by Cho does not just bring out the practical stance through which he approaches a subject but also it exposes the readers to his formidable and sharp wit.

Cho Ramaswamy scripted and performed in 27 Television serials. He wrote 10 books. He also acted and has done the screenplay of films such as *Thenmazhai*, *NinaivilNindraval*, *Bommallattam*, *Aayiram Poi* and *PanamPaththumSeyyum*, all of which proved to be box office hits.

EngeBrahmanan? One of the popular books of Cho which has been broadcasted as a serial in television is the evidence of Cho's mastery of humour and satire. This series personified the typical Tamil Brahmin, Cho who articulated the voice of the upper elite in Tamil Nadu explaining the importance and the practical use of the Hindu religion, cultural practices, rites and rituals. But he also indulged in questioning what the religion and culture meant in common sense in the current times. The book which also titled the same deals with general misconceptions in Hinduism in the form of

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interesting, witty and easy to read conversations between the lead characters. He strongly asserts that caste is acquired by one's birth. Cho Ramaswamy, being a Brahmin himself, the book is expected to be an explanation of Veda and its practices, but on the contrary this book remained an absolute eye opener to not just Brahmins but all. It has also questioned the relevance of the culture and religious practices in the current times. But as a series, it reached audience better.

Cho wrote extensively on religion, his religious books include *Mahabaratham Pesugirathu*, *Valmiki Ramayanam* and *Verukkathakkadha Brahmaniyam*. Some critics compared him with Rajaji for his in-depth knowledge and well versification of Hindu scriptures. With this knowledge he tried to clear misconceptions about the Hindu religion.

Cho kept reserved his sharp wit for every commoner of mundane life. His sarcasm and wit appealed very much to urban, particularly to Tamil Brahmin middle class who were frustrated during the period (under the rule of Dravidian groups) with the ills of government. They were unsure of their place in the public sphere because of the Dravidian politics. Cho has never failed to delineate those insecurities in the book at the same time he never had mercy in criticizing their stereotypical ideologies of Brahmins. Cho's novel, *Koovam Nadi Karaiyinele* (On the Banks of the Cooum River) criticized the then-ruling government of Tamil Nadu. He was a merciless critic, indeed. He was very sensible on naming his magazine. His choice of title for his magazine is that he could predict the unpredictable like the great Muhammad bin Tughlaq. He also invited conversation in the yearly meetings he organised for his readers – and these became occasions for him to play a many a tender role of being a political sage.

He is the only person who is capable of providing a counter to that other great performer and satirist of Tamil Nadu, the actor MR Radha, closely identified with Periyar EV Ramasamy and his movement for his radical atheistic dialogues. Radha often scripted his own role, that of a malcontent who severely attacked the social order and mocked at piety, faith, caste and social authority. Cho stood giving counters to him by emphasizing the practices of religion in practical life.

There are many more flowers to add to his laurel. He was a fine elocute that the Prime Minister Narendra Modi, while tweeting on the demise of Cho Ramaswamy quoted an incident in which the PM, Modi was called on to speak in an annual function of 'Tughlaq' (the political Tamil magazine edited by Cho). Modi started his address "I returned the favour, but don't think I matched Cho's eloquence." (India Today) Indeed, Modi called him "Rajguru" (India Today). He was a political confidante of the late Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu, Dr. J. Jayalalithaa. Though he was very intimate with State and Central Government, they never escaped from his cruel editorial attack. Cho passed away on 7th December 2016. His death created a vacuum in the field of Journalism and Tamil Cinema. His loss is indeed irreplaceable.

Born in an orthodox family, Cho Ramaswamy is insightful about the injustice that is meted out to a particular sect of people by the State Apparatus that he has scripted a play and named it reflecting Nietzsche's famous line "God is Dead". But Cho Ramaswamy was an intellect to great degree that he illustrated the entire concept of Nihilism through a stage play. In his Prologue Cho tactfully explains the title of the play without offending others by ensuring that he is not an atheist and that he is articulating the voice of the victimized class of society. He further emphasizes the rhetoric interrogative method that suggests the title of the play. Without asserting that there is no God, he joins his hands with people who were frustrated with the injustice to which they are subjected to and expecting God to save them from the crisis. Cho, in order to justify the interrogative form of his title, has stressed a point in his Prologue to the play that he is concerned only with raising the question and it is the duty of the audience to find an answer to the question. Thus, his title become "Is God Dead?"



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Nihilism is not new to the world but then it became popular in the nineteenth century Europe marked with a remarkable cultural change with the advent of science. European people, for a long period believed that man is created by God in his own image but when Charles Darwin came out with his *Theory of Evolution* nullifying the Bible, people turned sceptic towards religion. On removing away the already existing epicentre, the religion, the life of the people has become void. When people believed in religion they believed in the concept of after-life. They believed that virtues would be rewarded with Paradise and vices would be punished with Pandemonium. So, they had a moral purpose of living. With the emergence of scientific theories people started disbelieving religion resulting in purposeless life.

Nietzsche thought people need something to fill the voidness. So, he wished to replace God with man as people no more believed in the existence of God. Replacing God is not that simple. He needs a man superior within everyman to other men (comparatively) - probably an 'Übermensch'. This idea of Nietzsche's 'Übermensch' was misinterpreted by Nazi Hitler making him think Germans are superior to others. It is not an idea just confined with Hitler's Nazi Government, wherever there is an idea of hegemony, there comes the misinterpreted idea of Übermensch which removed God from the centre replacing man. The theoretical assumption made in this paper is that religion is a cultural intermediary that develops a false consciousness in the mind of the people and false consciousness, by constant practising turns into an ideology through which the hegemonic group operates its power.

The play "Is God Dead?" revolves around the characters who can be elaborately divided into two sections of the society which remains mutually exclusive in their totality to the society: the privileged section, rather hegemonic class and the under-privileged. Hegemony is a person or a group of persons holding power dominate others either by convincing them or by enforcing them. In a civil society like India, most of the time hegemony occurs with consensus as dissensus would be applicable to democratic state. In the words of Femia, hegemony is "...the predominance obtained by consent rather than force of one class or group over other classes; and it is attained through myriad ways in which the institution of civil society operates to shape directly or indirectly..." (31). According to Foucault, power can be operated in two ways: overtly operation and covertly operation. Overtly operation is having direct control over the people resulting in master-slave relationship. This operation of power is highly dangerous to the hegemonic group as the victims at one point of time will realize that being slave is not their destined fate and they may gradually indulge themselves in rebellion. On the other hand, covertly operation is a tactful way of imposing power on people whereby the hegemonic group will not have a direct imposition of power on the people but they make people to give their consent to be ruled by them. To gain consent from people is not uncomplicated. They certainly need few intermediaries to stand between the hegemonic group and their victims. The role of such intermediaries is to develop faith in people. After channelling all their effort to gain trust from the people, these intermediaries tend to introduce the hegemonic ideology to the people and make them believe those ideologies and allow them to practice it regularly to make it a habit. After all, nobody questions their own habit! The hegemonic, to impose power chose culture as their intermediary and shaped them as people are sensitive and particular in practicing their respective culture. The culture is not as simple as the word is. It is a broad term that covers the ideas, the beliefs, the customs, the traditions, the practices, the politics, the art, the architecture, the literature, the language, the music, the folk, the myth, the cult, the religion, and other such institutions which may be called the pop-culture. The hegemonic group is capable of influencing and exploiting the culture to achieve their ends. And the representatives of the culture, in turn gain certain power so that they could also get a membership into the class of powerful and they need not be one among the powerless victims of the hegemonic. Cho's play "IraivanIranthivitana?" remarkably marks how culture offers a space where power can be executed. By talking about the mortality of 'Iraivan' (God),

Cho wanted to emphasize the role of religion as a cultural intermediary to expose the operation of power within a structure.

In Cho Ramaswamy's play "IraivanIranthivitana?" (Is God Dead?), a group of people enjoy the privileges and are questioned by none and they could be considered as Gramsci's hegemonic group. Dr. Navaneetham, the representative of hegemonic group has a tendency to operate people using power. From his junior doctor Ragu to the local man Michael, he exhibits his dominion status openly. Dr. Navaneetham's accidental discovery of a medicine for tuberculosis made him famous. Addicted to the recent popularity, he announces that he would serve the poor local slum people with the medicine free of cost. His ward-boy Michael, considers the doctor as demi-god and begs him to choose his slum for the free medical camp as many of his slum people suffer from Tuberculosis. A social work team from Ladies Club comes forward with LeelaSivaram as its secretary to function as an intermediary to arrange the medical camp without knowing the fact that the medicine of Dr. Navaneetham hasn't been tested properly and that Dr. Navaneetham has bribed for the fast approval of the medicine without the formal test. Unaware of the consequence that they are about to face, the patients from the local slum celebrated the doctor. It is not much longer that Michael understands that in the name of the medical camp, a clinical test had been made on the poor slum people and they died subsequently. Michael files a case against Dr. Navaneetham in Medical Council and the doctor is capable of nullifying the case without showing even a trace of guilt for having killed a set of poor people. Michael was seized by an impotent anger on seeing the injustice meted out to the poor dead souls. He understands the foul play of the power. What is more dreadful realization of Michael is that even the religion which talks about virtues and vices surrenders to the power that is dominating the society. His conversation with Father D'Souza deserves an empirical study on culture which provides space to legitimize the exercise of power.

Dr. Navaneetham who legally kills 18 local people has achieved all his means while the poor Michael who fights for justice gets defeated as nobody wants to go against a renowned nominee of the title Padmavibushan, Dr. Navaneetham. Michael tried various means to bring out the injustice meted out to his people. He went to press to publish a story against the doctor but the press fails him; he went to the Secretary of the Social Work, Mrs. LeelaSivaram but she gets absconded as she has been a part of the camp and finally Michael approaches Father D'Souza with a vain hope that the religion would stand by the side of the poetic justice. Unfortunately, the poor Michael fails to understand that press, religion, NGOs are the cultural intermediaries which help the hegemonic group to coerce power on people.

The hegemonic groups create in the mind of the people a fear by false consciousness. Throughout the history the so-called tool, fear, of the hegemonic group was created by religion. On an overview of history, one can easily understand that the church had committed several periodic acts of violence to exercise or coerce power on people. The instances like witch burning, stoning heretics and excommunication in history are related to Church. But this is not just confined to one religion, even among Hindus, in India, for the enforcement of caste system, the hegemonic people use the notion of Karma. The intentionally made discrimination and the violence exercised by certain group of people in the name of religion can only be accomplished by the ideology they create in the minds of people. Timothy Fitzgerald is right when she calls religion an ideological function as religion has an ability to control people. She says:

The general ideological function of 'religion' discourses is to produce 'religion' in a way that makes it seem like a category-in-itself, a kind of thing in the world pertaining to special experiences, institutions, beliefs, and practices. The activity of producing discourses about religion

helps us to forget that we are, indirectly and tactically producing, maintaining and validating the category of ‘the secularism’” (Fitzgerald 210)

The ideology is created by consensus of the people than enforcement. The consent from the people without rebellion can only be achieved by religion hence it is held as one of the institutions of cultural intermediaries.

The cultural intermediary role of religion is obviously been portrayed in the play with the scenes of Father D’Souza. Michael was given a picaresque introduction in the play. He was introduced to the audience an atheist. Being a desolate orphan, Michael was left to starve as a child. He grew into a rogue and had no trust either in God or in Man. It was Father D’Souza who saved Michael from the mob who chased him for his notorious aggressiveness. Father D’Souza with a sound piece of his mind left him under the care of Dr.Navaneetham who made him his ward boy. Michael acknowledged Father D’Souza’s concern on him. On seeing D’Souza’s act of mercy and Dr.Navaneetham’s announcement of free medical camp, Michael gradually transformed into a man with hope. The scene of Susainathan with his baby made him pious. When Susainathan baby was left incurable by the medical team, Father D’Souza prays for the baby and fortunately the child was saved and Michael gave his testimony on the miracle but when the same child was caught inside the collapsed building, Father D’Souza asks Susai to accept the will of God. It is at this point that Michael realizes the role played by the religion in creating false consciousness among the people. When incurable baby was saved from the dreadful illness, Father D’Souza asked Susainathan to praise the God as he claims that it is God who rescued the baby. But when the same baby is caught inside the collapsed building and believed to be dead, Father D’Souza asked Susainathan not to blame God and asked him to accept the will of God. It is after all, the same religion which called man a sinner due to the sin committed by his godfather Adam and his wife Eve and that he will go to hell if he fails to follow the words of God which is again a false consciousness created in the minds of people veiling the function of power in the society from the eyes of people. This idea was stitched tight into the minds of people with a regular interval by conducting Mass and Sunday classes. The institution such as religion, schools, advertisements, movies, NGOs and other such cultural networks let certain group of people enforce their ideas and beliefs on others as legitimate by creating fear in the minds of people as does the exemplification of religion above. By practicing the fear of people again and again they normalize it.

Even when Michael discovers the trick played by Dr.Navaneetham, he requested Father D’Souza to disclose the meanness of the doctor but D’Souza rejects Michael’s plead by confessing that he has promoted religion by quoting Dr.Navaneetham’s free medical camp as the mercy of God. It has now become very clear to Michael that the cultural intermediaries play a vital role in the construction of ideology by using fear as a tool. Thus, Eagleton’s definition of ideology aptly suits in the play. He claims ideology as “... a matter of ‘discourse’ rather than ‘language’. It concerns the actual uses of language between particular human subjects for the production of special effect” (Eagleton 27). D’Souza owns respect in the play because he is a church man or rather a representative of a cultural intermediary. He wins over the arguments with Michael on the existence of God and Susainathan on explaining God’s will because the special effect it creates on people as their minds were toned in such a way that they accept whatever the religious man says. Religion being a sensational topic no one dares to talk against it neither does Cho want to. But he effectively writes a play with all the questions he had in his mind and he allows people to think over it.

To understand culture, one must study religion as religion has been found in one form or other in all human societies for a long period. Religion serves several purposes in the society at the same time it depends on the society for its signification. It is established as a place of social interaction and

social control. As religion has been the centre of many people, it has a greater control over people, otherwise the arrogant mob that chased to harm Michael in the play wouldn't have controlled by the words of Father D'Souza. In fact, religion is such an institution that maintains social inequalities. In the history, one can easily find how religion supported Divine Right Theory of oppressive monarch and how it encouraged caste system in India.

Many critical theorists have scepticism on religion as they promote the idea that one should be satisfied with what they have as it is the will of God. They argue that the hegemonic power has used religion to keep poor people poor, so that they would not question the power as financial power is also one among the part of power dynamics.

According to the great thinker of Anarchist Movement Mikhail Bakunin, the power to think and the desire to rebel are the two features that distinguish man from ape. He was disturbed with the social power which developed two institutions to break the power of thinking and desire of rebelling by the people. The two institutions are the state and the religion. He undertakes a deep reading of the *Bible* and placed his argument with a hyper-hypothesis: to Bakunin, the God in the *Bible* was "certainly the most jealous, the most vain, the most ferocious, the most unjust, the most bloodthirsty, the most despotic, and the most hostile to human dignity and liberty" while Satan, the arch-fiend, was "the eternal rebel, the first freethinker and the emancipator of worlds." (Bakunin 10)

Bakunin believed that the lack of rational thinking and education from the part of people, kept them in enchantment of religion. But in certain countries like India, religion was taught as education. Only after the British colonization the system of education has changed. That is why in India caste discrimination is found much dominating taking people to the extent of honour killing – a topic which doesn't come under the scope of this paper. Further, the capitalism and bourgeois domination all over the world, brought people closer to alcohol and religion. According to Bakunin, the quintessence of every religious system was "impoverishment, enslavement and annihilation of humanity for the benefit of divinity" and moreover "the idea of God implies the abduction of human reason and justice; it is the most decisive negation of human liberty and necessarily ends in the enslavement of mankind, both in theory and practice" (Bakunin 24-25). Bakunin as a child of enlightenment was very clear in his idea that slavery is conditioned by God and religion. He has gone to the great extent to say "if God really existed, it would be necessary to abolish him". (ibid 8) Mikhail Bakunin believed that the state and religion were bonded together in a disentangle knot that prevented and harmed the emancipation of the poor and working classes, maintaining them in the state of acquiescent. Periyar (E. V. RamaswamyNaicker) too shares Bakunin's idea of God and religion which is evident from an article he wrote on his party paper in Tamil Nadu named *Kudiarasu*, he says "only in a country where there is no devotion to God or the nation – state will there be people who do not suffer without proper work" (qtd. in Manohar 4). Periyar is such a militant atheist and believed that religion and God were harmful for a progressive society.

Though, Periyar was highly criticized in many issues of Cho Ramaswamy's magazine *Tughlaq* and though Cho was cold towards anarchism, "Is God Dead?" (IraivanIranthuvittana?) typically recalls the ideologies and the policies of Periyar. Religion made people believe all that happens to them is their destined fate and their passiveness and tolerance in the earthly materialistic world would bring them eternal happiness in the Heaven, afterlife. Is Cho really against religion and God? He belonged to an orthodox brahmin family and he maintained it till his death. He was a man who could readily give a witty counter to an atheist argument like that of M. R. Radha'. He was a man who could not tolerate the rally that was organized by E. V. RamaswamyNaicker (Periyar) against Ram and Sita in Salem district. What then made Cho Ramaswamy to title his play questioning the immortality of God? It is the power structure that disturbed Cho to the very core. Cho accepted the

God in Heaven without an earthly representative. When there is a medium between God and man, the medium enjoys certain privilege and in order to hold the privilege he gets associated with the hegemonic group and stand by them to crush the poor people. As long as the people believe in the medium, they can enjoy their state of being a State Apparatus. Virtues and vices; sins and sinners are rules necessarily meant only for common people. The rules and regulation are mundane man phenomenon. The upper-class are exempted from it because they have excess economic well-being. This may, indeed, reflect George Orwell's *Animal Farm*, "All animals are equal/ But some animals are more equal than others" (134). It is not just the upper-class who are exempted from rules but also the lower sect of people who do not care for rules, principles and ethics in their life. They are also exempted because nobody cares or bothers them. Michael in the beginning of the play belongs to this sect of people and he had least concern about the way of living. Father D'Souza gradually taught him about morality and principles and gave him hope in the course of the play to leave him hopeless, desolate, disappointed and broken.

Father D'Souza failed to help Michael to unveil the mask of Dr. Navaneetham because, the Father has created faith in people. The common man values every word spoken by the religious representatives are not always right. Faith plays an important role as it is the only trump card in the hands of people like Father D'Souza to have control on the mass of people and rule them with their consensus.

Father D'Souza in his preaching showed Dr. Navaneetham as an example of God sent man of mercy to help the need. Even after knowing the reality, Father D'Souza do not want to self-contradict his own preaching. He doesn't want to contradict his own claim and falsify his preaching. It shows the self-centred nature of the religion as an institution. If these representatives of religion would not have entered into the play of power structure, religion would not have been criticized by any of the theorists like Bakunin and Periyar. Since power uses God to achieve their means, critics consider God as a human creation. In the words of Bakunin, God is an "abstraction without reality, content and determination" (Basic 7). For Bakunin God and religion are the arch enemies of the poor people and the oppressed. In the name of God and religion, these people are exploited by the ruling class. The acceptance of the very idea of God itself, for Bakunin, was a denial of humanity and freedom. Man made religion to control others. The people who take up the role of religious leaders enjoy certain advantage of being commanding and governing over others. So, religion is not something that is associated with Heaven. On deep reflection, one can realize that religion has its actual association with state affairs and it is purely a political phenomenon. On understanding this Cho has written the play which talks about power politics and still he named it on the existence of God as he realized that Religion is an instrument of power politics. The interrogative title "Is God Dead?" can be given an answer with Bakunin theory on religion. Though Cho does not talk about the role of god and religion in the operation of power, he has completely demonstrated it on the stage through the play.

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