

**Of the State and its Subjects: Power and the Apparatuses of Control and  
Oppression in Caryl Churchill's *Softcops***

**Mamata Sengupta**  
Assistant Professor  
Department of English  
Islampur College, West Bengal

**Abstract**

Right from its very inception, the state has operated as a hegemonic power. Not only does it promote doctrines that reflect the social, cultural, economic, religious, political or philosophical needs and aspirations of the dominant group but also programs its subjects to conform to those doctrines in order to ensure its absolute control on and power over them. In the present paper, I shall try to re-read Caryl Churchill's 1978 play *Softcops* with a view to highlighting the operations of different kinds of repressive and ideological state apparatuses in monitoring the thoughts and actions of the citizens. Efforts will also be made to trace the subversive strategies of the deviant citizens to resist the hegemonic pulls of the state at coercing them into conformity.

**Keywords:** State, Power, State Apparatuses, Identity, Subversion.

## **Of the State and its Subjects: Power and the Apparatuses of Control and Oppression in Caryl Churchill's *Softcops***

**Mamata Sengupta**  
Assistant Professor  
Department of English  
Islampur College, West Bengal

In our highly constrictive socio-political setup, what a man is and how s/he projects her/himself is continuously monitored and assessed by the dominant class. In fact, to be accepted and accommodated into the social matrix is to shun attributes or qualities that separate an individual from a group by marking his/her points of deviance from what the society prescribes as the 'norm' and the 'normal'. The state, as the most powerful political institution constituted by and for the dominant social class, keeps a tight vigil on its human subjects in order to identify and thereby eradicate all possible attempts at difference and/or deviance. While history abounds in the examples of suppressing mass resistance through the use of what Louis Althusser calls Repressive State Apparatuses, the instances of applying Ideological State Apparatuses to manipulate the citizens into perfect conformity with the state prescribed line of thoughts whereby all possibilities of resistance are nullified is, by no means, rare. In the present paper, I propose to re-read Caryl Churchill's highly controversial play *Softcops* with a view to highlighting the operations of the state and its repressive and ideological apparatuses of monitoring and controlling the citizens. Efforts will also be made to see how prescribed codes of conducts are produced and disseminated to the masses, how their ability or willingness to adapt to the will and dictates of the dominant ideology constitutes their socio-political interiority and exteriority, and how these citizens continuously negotiate the hegemonic pulls of the state through resistance strategies and subversive ploys.

The play *Softcops* was originally written in 1978 but was first performed on January 2, 1984 by the Royal Shakespeare Company under the direction of Howard Davis at the Barbican Pit. The play is set in Paris of the 1830s. In her note to the play, Churchill accepts her debt to Michele Foucault's seminal work *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* which she finds 'analyses the changes in methods of control and punishment' (P2 3). Among the other influences, as Churchill enumerates them, are Jeremy Bentham's conceptualization of the Panopticon and George Orwell's presentation of social surveillance in his novel *Nineteen Eighty Four*. Needless to say that the play owes its portrayal of social surveillance to Bentham's Panopticon, of the 'soft' methods for cultural controlling of individuals to the Foucauldian

conceptualization of punishment, and of the state machinery to impose such surveillance and control i.e. the ‘cops’ to Orwell’s omnipresent Big Brother.

In her note to the play, Churchill makes a very conscious attempt to highlight the context for writing *Softcops*:

*Softcops* was originally written in 1978, under a labour Government, where the question of soft controls seemed more relevant than in 1984, the year of its first production, when Thatcher was dismantling the welfare state. [...] In 1985, as the edition goes to press, the Government are attempting to depoliticise the miners and the rioters by emphasising a ‘criminal element’. (P2 3)

The year 1978 was witness to one of the greatest fiscal failures that the once mighty Britain had seen since the beginning of the century. Once again after 1975, the stock market had hit its rock bottom and with this the golden days of 1976 and 1977 faded into huge turmoil in currency, in interest rates and in inflation. As the year approached its second half the proverbial Winter of Discontent had already set in. The Labour Government led by James Callaghan as the serving Prime Minister was already in serious economic crisis to continue with its much-hyped welfare state policies. To cope with this erratic situation, Callaghan approached the International Monetary Fund for a loan of £2.3 billion which was seen by many as a serious insult for a ‘world power’ like Britain.

At this time, Callaghan’s reluctance to announce general election in due time (late 1978) coupled with his irresponsible press bite regarding the financial and industrial crisis that England was going through not merely lead to *The Sun* headline ‘Crisis? What Crisis?’ but also to a viral mass discontent. If Callaghan’s postponing of the general election was deemed to be the government’s strategy to deprive the British citizens of their constitutional rights then his utter apathy to the condition of the working class people only exacerbated the situation. Written at this precise moment of British history, *Softcops* thus symbolizes how the state invents and punishes the criminal class. However, by having its first production in 1984, the play, as Churchill worries, does not lose its edge; for the Conservative Government Margaret Thatcher led was too self-absorbed to pay attention to the sufferings of the masses. The ‘depoliticization’ of the Miner’s strike or the demolition of the trade unions substantiates the point.

*Softcops* opens with the picture of a public punishment where at least two convicts are to be punished for their crimes. The elaborate arrangements to prepare the scaffold so as to enhance its visibility from distance and gruesomeness from proximity are the state’s strategy to highlight the spectacle of suffering and the exemplary and then therefore deterrent nature of the punishment. Therefore, during the punishment the presence of the citizens especially of the school children who are deemed to be fit subjects for socio-cultural indoctrination are made

mandatory. The same attitude is discernible when the Headmaster leads the students near the scaffold and emphasizes the didactic nature of disciplinary actions taken by the state, 'Your country loves its children like a father. And when the children are bad the country grieves like a father. And punishes like a father' (P2 8).

Taking a step forward, the speech of the magistrate encouraging the citizens to see the punishment as the state's 'sad necessity' to maintain 'law' and 'social order' tries at once to showcase and validate the power it holds on its subjects and thereby warn the masses of what may befall them if that power is challenged or messed with. That black has been made the colour of the day instead of corresponding to the official meaning of 'grief' and 'mourning' at a citizen's act of delinquency resulting in the state's compulsion to 'separate ourselves from this citizen' and to 'inflict this penalty upon him' underscores the state's power to socially 'alienate' the citizens and to 'inflict' pain on them in case of disobedience of its codes of colour or of conduct in the manner and degree of the state's choice. Therefore, the much hyped 'mourning' becomes a veritable celebration if not of the state's 'vengeance' then of its condign power:

This is a day of mourning. We are, you see, in black. We mourn that one of our citizens has broken the law. We mourn that we must separate ourselves from this citizen and inflict this penalty upon him. Black symbolises our grief and our — ha — execration of his crime. This man has with his right hand [...] committed an act against his fellow men. And it is with grief that his right hand will be taken from him. We do not rejoice in vengeance. There will be no singing and dancing and fighting. It is a sad necessity for him and for us. (P2 8-9)

Churchill's *Softcops* is an all male play offering a sharp contrast to the female world of *Top Girls*. Definitely, this stark absence of women figures, as Janelle Reinelt puts it, 'is not an accident' (Reinelt: 1999, 96). It is rather the playwright's strategy to highlight the parallel between patriarchy and the state since both of them thrive on ideational as well as repressive mechanisms to impose their hegemonic control and authority on the individual. Therefore, the state in *Softcops* with all its power apparatuses becomes a symbolic father to its citizens who are civilized, institutionalized and monitored as children according to the laws of acceptability and justly punished for all their delinquencies. It is for this reason that Dimple Godiwala opines:

With *Softcops* Churchill reprimands patriarchal society for its use of power to constrain and infantilize: society treats its prisoners like children and its children as prisoners; and, although 'the question of power remains a total enigma', 'to speak on this subject, to force the institutionalized networks of information to listen, to produce names, to point the finger of accusation, to find targets, is the first step in the reversal of power and the initiation of new struggles against existing forms of power (Godiwala: 2003, 72).

If the Magistrate as a representative of the repressive state apparatuses attempts to eradicate any/all instances of social/cultural/legal deviance with punishment and the headmaster as the ideological agent tries to hegemonize the citizen-children into unquestioned acceptance of such eradication, then the first convict Jacques Duval, a thief, is made to accept his crime and accede to the punishment in public with a view to justifying the state and its judgment. This show of supreme control on the deviant body is at once alarming and exemplary in nature; for it provides the citizen with a model for state-promoted physical as well as ideological disciplinary measures.

However, Churchill undercuts such a unidirectional power narrative by making Duval utter words which are not his own but are prompted by Pierre, the agent of the state. Duval's address to his fellow citizens is punctuated with both unintentional and intentional pauses and insertions. The unintentional pauses and insertions are indicative of the programmed and then therefore mediated nature of Duval's words whereas the intentional ones attempt to subvert such cultural programming of the individual's mind and speech. Duval's well thought insertions like 'Never steal even if you're hungry because' along with his mocking of Pierre's commands 'Go on' though are allowed full expression puncture the authorized narrative of the state with subversive ploys.

After Duval's right hand is severed, the second convict Lafayette is brought to receive capital punishment. Unlike the self-composed Duval, Lafayette is clearly disturbed; and when he is brought to the scaffold to accept his crimes instead of resorting to Duval's manipulative strategies or yielding to what Pierre taught him to speak, Lafayette vehemently expresses what he thinks he should say:

Lafayette. Look at me. Remember the name. Lafayette. Murderer. Murderer. Want to know what I did? Killed my boss. Killed old daddy. Anatole right in his office. [...] I'm meant to say sorry for that. Sorry sorry sorry sorry sorry. Do you think I am? I shit on the judges. [...] I'm not sorry. I'm glad. It wasn't easy but I did it. Lafayette did it. (P2 12-13)

Lafayette's frank rejection to parrot the state's commands and unequivocal confidence on himself and his deeds stand in sharp contrast to the dependency that the state tries to inculcate in its citizens. Needless to say, Pierre is at once surprised and dismayed to witness this act of verbal resistance, 'This isn't what we arranged he would say [...] Look, you agreed what you were going to say' while the magistrate orders for immediate execution of Lafayette (P2 13). But before the executioner can terminate Lafayette's life, the citizens, putatively for the first time in the history of the state, muster up courage to go against the state and actively oppose the decision to liquidate Lafayette. They break out into open violence, and a mad brawl ensues during which the scaffold is brought down and the magistrate the executioner and Lafayette all get hurt.

This sudden breaking of laws is perceived by the state as an act of civil disobedience; for it is through the implementation of the laws that a state comes to assert its identity and authority. It is at this juncture the need for alternative ways to enforce the state's authority on the citizens is felt, and Pierre, as a lackey of the state, comes up with the image of his much cherished 'Garden of Law':

Where, over several acres, with flowering bushes, families would stroll on a Sunday. And there would be displayed every kind of crime and punishment. [...] Guides to give lectures on civic duty and moral feelings. [...] Year after year. Quietly take into heart. A daily lesson. (P2 20)

The Garden of Law envisaged by Pierre is an example of socio-cultural brainwashing which according to D. M. Kowal effects to 'an impairment of autonomy, an inability to think independently, and a disruption of beliefs and affiliations [...] the involuntary reeducation of basic beliefs and values' (Kowal in A. E. Kazdin: 2000, 463-464). The garden with its totalitarian propaganda and torture techniques represents the state's attempts to indoctrinate the citizens into willing/unwitting surrender of their individuality to the state technologies whereby the personal memories can at once be dismantled by and supplanted with the official versions of knowledge and beliefs. Pierre's obsession with posters and placards with which he attempts to infiltrate the citizen's mind, quite in a similar manner, reveals his desire to master the world of graphos.

The ever visible iron cage that he plans to mount for the citizens is only an external emblem for the captivity that the citizens of the state are always in. Since the state presents itself to its citizens and decides their fate as a god on earth, the cage quite easily becomes what Pierre claims 'symbolic of the rejection of heaven and earth'. Therefore, the state can easily coerce the citizen families to visit the garden of laws even on 'Sunday' (the only non-working day) to 'walk there gravely and soberly and reflect' on 'the daily lesson' of 'civil duty and moral feeling' blurted out by travel guides. The citizens who were so long silent spectators of the state operative now become objects of social gaze and surveillance; for taking side of whom the state dubs as 'criminal' they have convinced the state of their own criminal instincts.

It is at this crucial juncture that Churchill introduces the criminal turned cop Vidocq whose past experiences of criminal activities the state wants to utilize for identifying potential criminals. With this, as Amelia Howe Kritzer puts it, society's 'power equation' gets inverted; for 'No longer are a small number of specially chosen "robbers" watched by the masses: now the masses are watched by a small number of specially chosen [robber turned] "cops"' (Kritzer: 1989, 126-127). Vidocq's assertion 'It's not what the punishment' is but the knowledge that 'you're going to get it' which keep people's latent criminality in control stand in sharp contrast to the gruesome posters of punishment procedures as well as apparatuses with which Pierre wants the scare the citizens; for whereas Vidocq's strategy is to subtly persuade people into submission Pierre relies too much on spectacles of horror which may and often can be



neutralized or overlooked. In sharp contrast to the lavish Garden of Law, Vidocq offers his 'card index box' theory whereby the entire population is divided into small segments and each segment is monitored by a group of informers and the detectives who have their trainings, just like Vidocq himself, not in preventing crimes but in executing them. Vidocq's idea gets the Magistrate's nod and with this he is appointed the Chief of the Police force of the state.

After a brief gap of time, the scene shifts to London where Vidocq is seen to hold a grand exhibition of the success of his detective force in catching 'so many criminals of Paris'. He is there with 'large Dutch painting of a battle, quantity of wax fruits, reaping hook, chopper, thumbscrews etc, manacles and chains, weighted boots, braces, a pen', and a 'black box' carrying the exterminated poet criminal Lacenaire's severed hand. The exhibition is as much a celebration of the state's repressive techniques as that of Vidocq's own success as what Churchill calls a 'Softcop'. His elaborate description of the exhibited items along with the proud display of his disguise techniques are motivated by the desire to the 'shock' and 'surprise' all erring individuals by the spectacle of state sponsored cruelty which may not suit Pierre's Garden of law but serves the purpose.

A disillusioned Pierre decides to give up his position in the repressive state apparatuses and plans to resituate himself in the world of ideological state technologies by becoming a teacher in the school where the Headmaster wields a supreme authority. Pierre's decision to become a teacher is inspired by his identification of the school as one of the most powerful institutions for socio-cultural indoctrination and of the children as fit subjects for such indoctrination due to their near tabula rasa state of existence. When the Headmaster defines the rules of the school and displays how strictly the students have been taught to follow them it represents a similar kind of conditioning power that the state exercises on its citizens. The division of the students into four groups 'the very good, the good, the mediocre and the bad' as represented by four different badges closely corresponds to Vidocq's classification of citizens. The utterly unruly students who refuse to be conditioned or coerced into discipline by the Headmaster are alienated from the rest of the boys. They form a fifth unnameable group 'the shameful' which derives its name from its members' involvement with incidents, decisions or actions which are deemed shameful by the laws governing the school. Therefore this group must, as the Headmaster dictates, wait to join their fellow students until they are tamed into perfect compliance with the laws and then therefore are perceived by the authorities to 'deserve' social acceptance and accommodation.

That the boys are promoted and demoted so that 'all are under equal pressure to behave well' essentializes the school's image as a veritable panopticon where the children along with their behaviour is always monitored and measured against the accepted standards and their performance encouraged or punished based on its conditioned or non-compliant nature. That the Headmaster seldom has to speak in the class but can actually teach everything by using two his fingers is a satirical comment on the nature and the quality of his teaching. His constant harping

on the placement of the students on the benches and his wish to control their unruly bodies through harnesses that all of them are made to put on and their minds through ‘a fine rigid frame’ of ideology that they are taught to put up with represents his desire to normalize them according to the set patterns ‘They will all be normal in time’.

This image of the harness evokes in Pierre’s mind how this school practice can be utilized inside the prison. In a sudden surreal way, Pierre is transported inside the state prison where he witnesses one of the convict boys is being put on an iron collar which is deemed to be the worst kind of punishment. Obsessively brooding on how to make a spectacle of the punishment and thereby increase its educational value, Pierre repeatedly questions the convict boy and the Warder about their respective attitudes to the collar and makes elaborate plans to parade the state with his placards, posters and lectures:

So would you say this is the worst punishment we have in terms of deterrent effects on the prisoners and also on the public who see them pass? [...] so would you agree their journey across France is a national education? And could be reinforced by placards and lectures? Perhaps I should travel with the chain gang and give a seminar in every village (P2 30).

It is at this moment that the warders leave the chained gangs of criminal alone and together they break into a ritualistic celebration of their freedom inside the prison which now they consider their own territory. When Pierre fails to understand the reason for such a celebration, one of the warders warns him about the inverted kind of disruption that mindless torture can breed:

It teaches bad men how to be worse and it teaches them pride in it. [...] Teaches the crowd to riot. [...] Teaches hate of the rich. Scorn of the obedient. Defence of fate. [...] whole country’s in uproar, sir, when the chain gang’s gone there. (P2 34)

That ruthless oppression instead of silencing the individual may teach him/her to resist and thereby subvert the marginalizing discourses makes Pierre remember his own past when Lafayette’s fiery speech prompted the citizens to rebellion and with that his dream of building Garden of Law dispelled forever. In a similar manner, the information that wherever ‘the chain gang’ has gone it has inspired a mass uproar clarifies that the same may happen once again in spite of Vidocq’s clever index card box strategy. Still trying to fight for his ‘placard-poster-seminar’ plan, Pierre once again avers ‘That’s because there are no placards’. But the warder’s sharp rejoinder that the mass doesn’t ‘have to behave. Not like you and me with jobs to lose’ not only highlights his performance as a Warder as a mere compulsion but also hints at the possibility of a similar enforced nature of Pierre’s obedience to the state.



After the Warder leaves, Pierre tries to continue with his interviewing, to which the entire gang of convicts break out into wild laughter accompanied by a song and dance:

What do these people want with us,  
Do they think they'll see us cry?  
We rejoice in what is done to us  
And our judges will die.

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Pleasure has betrayed you,  
She loves us instead.  
She'd rather dance along the street  
Than die with you in bed. (P2 35-36)

In this highly subversive song reminiscent of Satan's address to his fallen comrades writhing in pain in the fiery lake of the hell, the so called convicts gives voice to and thereby celebrates their 'unconquerable will', 'study of revenge', 'immortal hate', and 'courage never to submit or yield'. That the state will never see them cry is because the mindless torture that these convicts have been treated with instead of dampening their self-confidence has boosted it by providing them with a cause to live, fight and die for. Therefore, the 'scorn', the 'hate', and the 'fear' which characterize the state's ambivalent attitude to these convicts have been internalized by them so as to pay the state back in its own coin:

Your scorn, your hate, your fear,  
All belong to us.  
Your gold you hold so dear  
All belong to us.  
We've bought it with our lives,  
We'll give it to your wives  
for a kiss  
for a fuck  
When we're free when we're free  
Who would you rather be  
You or us?  
Try your luck.  
You or us. (P2 36)

Having thus announced their undaunted spirits, the convicts now threaten to dismantle the state's authority over one of its most prized possessions i.e. the women. It is at this point that the state authorities perceive the convicts to pose a serious challenge both to their sexual and their imperial dominance. Thus, the freedom of the convicts which they envisage as impending would surely leave the social and sexual hierarchy inverted making the king and the queen bear the

chains which the convicts now have been made to wear turning thereby 'you' into 'us' and vice versa:

Children bear your chains,  
It's not for very long.  
The king and queen will carry them  
When they hear our song.  
Children break your chains,  
They're beating on a drum.  
Our star is shining in the sky  
And our day will come. (P2 37)

While singing and dancing the convicts encircle Pierre, trip over him and drag him with them which give vent to their pent up anger and frustration at the inhuman oppression meted out to them. The song ends with a Whitmanesque call to the 'children' of the state both within the prison and outside to break out of the chains of compulsory subordination to the state and fight for their right on their body and being; for only they can be the pioneers to show the citizens an alternative way of living with dignity and honour.

The play now introduces one of the most influential British philosophers, Jeremy Bentham who is considered the father of both modern utilitarianism and the Panopticon. If utilitarianism promotes the maximization of the utility of everything, then such maximization can only be achieved through constant monitoring as much of the thing concerned as of whatever may be perceived to be a deterrent in the process. Needless to say, the panopticon serves this purpose of constant surveillance. The moment Pierre recognizes Bentham he becomes eager to get the man's approval for his Garden of Law, 'If you could support my scheme my garden might become a reality. May I show you?' (P2 37). The ghastly sight of the man in the cage being brutally tortured immediately disgusts Bentham but Pierre clarifies it to be a mere optical illusion just like the thousand other ones on which the state as a concept thrives. Bentham, however, cannot express his full confidence on Pierre's garden partly due to his own prejudice for the panopticon and partly on scores of the Garden's didactic and hence easy to be overlooked nature. Pierre in a like manner criticizes the panopticon for its disturbing nature of omnipresent observation that for him is a sheer waste of time and energy on the part of the state machinery. A battle of ideas ensues which is ended by Bentham's witty remark that it is not 'omnipresent observation' but the illusion of its presence that coerces man to submission.

When Pierre returns to visit the minister he has changed his strategy for his garden to a significant extent. No longer relying on his signature placards and posters, Pierre now attempts to overwrite a man's memory through inscribing the state's dictates on it. Instead of making individuals visit the garden of laws on weekends for training and indoctrination he now plans to make their everyday life a sort of training workshop. This is evident from the manner he deals

with the forty-two year old man by erasing his name by a number and providing him with a highly hierarchized family composed of similarly indoctrinated members:

Here you will live in a group called a family. The other boys are your brothers. Each family has a head, whom you will obey, and is divided into two sections, each with a second in command. You will have a number. You will answer to it at roll call three times a day. Your number is 321. This is your elder brother. He will stay with you all the time. And I will pay constant attention to your case. (P2 41)

Pierre's strategy to provide the individual with a family that has been constructed according to the rules of the state lays bare his intention to bring the individual's private life under state's surveillance. Leaving aside his obsession with the garden of law, Pierre now resorts to Vidocq's theory of 'card index box' which, he now sees as a better to rule. The elder brother that Pierre now provides the man with is the Orwellian Big Brother who now dictates the norms to be followed even while sleeping.

As the play nears its end, we find Pierre drinking wine on a beach. The holidaymaker joins him. Pierre proudly proposes him to show his garden which now is not restricted within a specific space but has engulfed the entire state. Built on the panoptic principle, this new garden keeps all human beings with individual identities and wishes as its captive either on criminal or on psychological grounds and maintains a round the clock surveillance on their lives. Pierre's claim 'I know them all by name' and 'I've turned a mob into individuals' lays bare how the individuals have been robbed of both the anonymity, strength and security of group belonging and have thus been alienated by the omniscient societal gaze. Therefore, when a person attacks Pierre, he is immediately liquidated by the state machinery.

Pierre's drunken rehearsal of the speech that he is to give during the foundation ceremony of his garden now provide us with both the official and the real list of crimes and their possible punishments. If the official version runs like 'the criminals are punished, the sick are cured, the workers are supervised, the ignorant are educated, the unemployed are registered, the insane are normalized' then the real and the unofficial one reads like 'the criminals are supervised. The insane are cured. The sick are normalized. The workers are registered. The unemployed are educated. The ignorant are punished' (P2 49). It is only at this point that Pierre remembers that he needs to 'change' the lines to make them a little less frank. Thus, his final version turns out to be something like 'The ignorant are normalized. The sick are punished. The insane are educated. The workers are cured. The criminals are cured. The unemployed are punished. The criminals are normalized' (P2 49). Needless to say, these alterations do little to hide the shameless persecution of the innocent members of the society. The comment of the holidaymaker 'Lovely day out for them. Nice treat' instead of praising Pierre's strategies, highlight a scathing attack on him and the state he represents (P2 49).

According to J.K. Galbraith, any political, social, cultural or religious institution tries to promote and perpetuate its ideology through a strategic enculturation of conditioned behaviours, models of thoughts and exemplary actions into its target individuals. The individuals are made to accept these preset models through the exercise of three kinds of power, the condign power, the compensatory power and the conditioned power. According to Galbraith, ‘Condign power threatens the individual with something physically or emotionally painful enough so that he forgoes pursuit of his own will or preference in order to avoid it’ (Galbraith: 1983, 14). Compensatory power, in contrast, ‘offers the individual a reward or payment sufficiently advantageous or agreeable so that he (or she) forgoes pursuit of his own preference to seek the reward instead’ (Galbraith: 1983, 14). Conditioned power, finds Galbraith, is ‘exercised by changing belief’ through ‘persuasion, education, or the social commitment to what seems natural, proper, or right causes’ making the individual ‘submit to the will of another or of others’ (Galbraith: 1983, 5-6). In *Softcops*, we can very easily see the operations of these three sorts of power. However, what saves the play from becoming a frustrating tale of state-sponsored reign of terror is the masses’ claim on their individual identity that offers both the means and the incentive of thwarting the various impositions of the state and the dominant ideology.

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