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Politics of Text: New Directions in Marxist Reading

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Abstract

The present paper seeks to explore various dimensions of Marxist criticism prevailing in contemporary theory. It deals with basic tenets of communism in a concise manner. Thereon it attempts to understand the new and varied aspects of critical theory which blend Marxism with other valid findings of different schools of literary theory only to arrive at the larger picture of literature and its relevance to human life. Thus, the argument has been built that the relevance of Marxism has not diminished through the history only it has become more eclectic in scope by benefitting from other theoretical persuasions of literary criticism.

Keywords

Marxism; Ideology; Alienation Effect; Hegemony; Vulgar Marxists.



Political Criticism came to prominence during 1970s and Marxism remained the most influential form along with Feminism and Postcolonial Studies. All the three types are characterized by certain common features including a globalizing imperative, a political agenda and an invective to support it, non-literary roots and a historical approach in contrast to the synchronic approach of structuralism.

American Marxist critic Fredric Jameson suggested not too long ago that we now unknowingly suffer from a 'waning of affect'- a loss of genuine emotion because of the complete dominance of the capitalist model in our contemporary world (Jameson 60). Jameson's statement at once validates the existence of the class stratification in contemporary society and the influence it is exerting on our psyche.

Marxism made its advent in the world intellectual scene with the publication of *Communist Manifesto* in 1848 jointly written by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels in Germany. Karl Marx was a German philosopher. He read an article of Engels in a journal and from here began an intellectual partnership which was bound to change the world view and the world history thenceforth. Together they gave economic theories which they called as Communism (not Marxism). The central belief and argument of Marxism is that the means of production, distribution and exchange of material resources should be state owned rather than private ownership in order to achieve ideal living conditions for human beings based on a classless society.

Marxism is a materialist philosophy and not an essentialist philosophy. It tries to explain the existence of this world in terms of material reality which surrounds us instead of the Idealist philosophy which gives priority to the metaphysical world beyond the scope of physical senses. While the Idealist philosophies try to understand the world, Marxism with its materialist approach seeks to change it. In 1859, Marx published *A Critique of Political*

Economy. In its foreword, he said “The mode of production of material life conditions the general process of social, political and intellectual life”.

Therefore it is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence but their social existence that determines their consciousness i.e. ideas, philosophies and mental pictures. Or in other words, the organization of economy conditions our perception and thinking of the world around us. This organization of economy which comprises the production, distribution and exchange of the material resources is termed as the *base* of the economy and this base is instrumental in determining *the superstructure* of the society which includes education, law, religion, philosophy, political programmes, arts and literature. Thus base is primary phenomena and superstructure is the secondary response. This view is completely at odds with the Victorian intellectual thought supported by Matthew Arnold and the likes.

For Marxists everything is in a flux, in a permanent state of change. Nothing is absolute as an essentialist may assert. However within the flux everything is interconnected, the interconnections may be complex and mediated. This leads to a characteristic form of relationship between the base and the superstructure which is termed as *dialectical* instead of a purely mechanical cause-effect. This is extremely important because this leaves a scope of human endeavour to change its life circumstances and saves it from becoming another version of the Fatalist philosophies where the human being acts as a mere apparatus for fate to realize itself.

Marxism sees history as the history of class struggle, the history of struggle to control the material conditions. There is a constant struggle for power between different classes and this power includes economic, political and social advantages. Modern industrial capitalism has intensified this struggle evermore. The labourer is always at a disadvantage. He gets much lesser than his worth, while the capitalist gains manifolds more than his investment. The labourer is aware and conscious of this but he is unable to

understand the much subtler form of exploitation. The worker in the course of his work is constantly getting alienated. He becomes a thing instead of a being. This exploitation is showing its psychological consequences in the form of alienation of the worker from the craft he produces. The worker is just a small inconsequential link within the whole chain of production. He performs fragmented, repetitive tasks and is deskilled. As opposed to this in the olden cottage industry system a worker was completely responsible right from the production to sale. This alienation is called *reification* as termed by Marx in *Das Kapital*.

Different Marxists differ on their belief in the extent to which socio-economic base determines the superstructure of a society. Those who see a direct cause-effect relation between the two have been called the Vulgar Marxists. They assume that a writer is directly conditioned by the social class to which he belongs. It must be asserted that Marx or Engels never believed in this kind of direct relationship. According to them, a literary work must be seen as independent of an author's political views. But at the same time, the text is in itself not independent of an author's social reality. The social reality of an author unconsciously seeps into the text independent of the political agenda of the author and this presents an even better and authentic picture of the real world of class conflicts and political tensions

In 1930, Georg Lukacs, the major Hungarian Marxist critic of the period studied the works of Honore de Balzac and Leo Tolstoy, and held them in a very high esteem. Lukacs appreciates the realistic writings of these two writers much more than any fiercely polemical political writings of any leftist writer. He claims,

Achilles and Werther, Oedipus and Tom Jones, Antigone and Anna Karenina: their individual existence...cannot be distinguished from their social and historical environment. Their human significance,

their specific individuality cannot be separated from the context in which they were created. (Lukacs)

These characters transcend the ideological limitations of their creators in order to build social realm of their own where the true depiction of the warring forces of society are visible. For Marxists such an approach of an author towards the social reality and the textual reality is called a dialectical approach. Although all Marxists are one over the relationship of the social background of the artist or the writer, this deterministic character has been a constant source of debate.

The pertinent question is that why is a worker unable to identify his alienation and protest against it. The answer to this is that there are certain forces at the workplace and in the society which prevent the worker from seeing his own plight and these forces collectively come under the heading of *ideology*. Ideology misrepresents the world. It presents the world as natural, just and harmonious and the individual never stands up against his own exploitation. Rather they court it. This succumbing to ideology and living in an ideal illusory world is called *false consciousness*.

French Marxist Louis Althusser has tried to provide some insights into the working of ideology. He claims that ideology works by means of 'ideological state apparatuses' like educational system, religious organizations, law, police and so on. These sub-systems of ideology have material existence. This way ideology presents an imaginary relationship of the individuals to their real conditions of existence. People may believe that they are acting out of their free will but actually they are all led by a system with its infinite appendages. This is a point of convergence with Levi Strauss's Anti-humanist Structuralist stance.

The noteworthy point is that ideology works equally and universally over both the worker and the capitalist. Both are equally oblivious of these forces. Both are equally deceived as acting out of their free individual will.

Althusser also draws upon Jacques Lacan to explain the wide and immense power which ideology succeeds upon exerting upon an individual. For Lacan, the process of growing up leaves an individual incomplete. According to him, infants live in an Imaginary world. During their transition from infancy to childhood, they develop language and enter the realm of Symbolic. The real world is symbolized by language and similar other systems which operate like language. The identity of the child is formed as a reflection of its interaction with the outside world. It is relational - a notion that introduces the principle of difference into the process of identity construction. The identity is not fixed or absolute. Rather it is subject to the social and cultural configuration in which we find ourselves. Identity must change. Thus a feeling of wholeness and undifferentiation is lost forever and is characterized by a lack and a desire. This is followed by a deep-felt longing that can never be fulfilled but can only be satisfied with symbolic substitutes, and literature being one of them. People enter into complex relationship with these substitutes and look forward to fill their lack, even if temporarily and illusionarily. Ideology provides an external and artificial sense of completion of the void thus created. It convinces the individual that he is whole, real and concrete.

When these findings of Althusser are extended to literature it is found that literature presents a world to its readers which seems free and autonomous and allures them to believe that they too can be free and independent in their thought and action. Thus the lack is replaced by a sense of completeness.

Althusser also read and got influenced by a British critic of the period, Pierre Macherey. Macherey in his *A Theory of Literary Production* (1966, translated in 1978) presents a view which has undertones of Jacques Derrida's theory. He accepts that literary works are pervaded by ideology and at the same time he believes that there are cracks left where the text is not in conscious control of itself. These are the points of textual revelations. These gaps in the

text are actually the gaps in the ideology. They are important for breaking the silences of the text. Thus, the text has almost an unconscious of its own where all the material which is ideologically repressed lies.

Macherey with other like-minded critics Terry Eagleton and Terence Hawkes prominently are not interested in the forces which make a text coherent. Instead they look for all those forces which render incoherence to a text. Thus while reading a text they are attracted to its inherent instabilities and much like a Poststructuralist reader they turn the text against itself to discover its unsaid meaning. The only difference is Macherey tries to find the absolute meaning concealed within whereas for Poststructuralist the absolute meaning does not exist at all.

Catherine Belsey, a British literary critic, in her critical readings of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's *Sherlock Holmes Stories*, finds that a strong patriarchal ideology is at work in these stories. She discovers that the female characters in these stories remain unexplored, opaque and inert which itself speaks volumes against the ideology of the text. She also argues against the form of the realist novel along with all features of conventionality like sequential plot, fixed narratorial points, psychological characterization and chronological time schemes are found. She considers them as implicit instruments of validation of a capitalistic social structure. On the contrary, she hails the modernistic forms of literature, like the works of Franz Kafka and Samuel Beckett which are abstract and absurd and break free from such conventional features.

Another opponent of the direct socialist realism is Bertolt Brecht from Germany. His notion of *alienation effect* in drama involves devices which draw the attention of the audience to the fact that what they see on the stage is not reality but imagination which is akin to the Russian formalist concept of *defamiliarization*

Althusser may have satisfied his readers regarding the working of ideology but he falls short on establishing the eternal conflict between the

power of ideology and the striving of individual free will where literature serves as the battleground between the two.

In the early 1970s Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci modified the concept of ideology to settle this issue. He put forward the concept of *Hegemony* as an alternative to that of ideology. The fundamental difference between the two is the extent of forcefulness. Gramsci's hegemony is far less coercive in nature than Althusser's ideology. It too exerts its influence through the cultural institutions and norms of the civic society but it leaves an ample scope for the individual to dissent and set new standards of social thought and behavior.

Raymond Williams, another British Marxist supported this view of Gramsci. According to him, hegemony in contrast to ideology is not a monolithic structure. Rather it has a composite and heterogeneous character with complex internal structures. This allows it to be challenged and modified. Thus ideology itself is susceptible to change and revisions.

If history is revisited, it is observed that the Soviet attitude to arts and literature was significantly different in the pre-war year i.e. 1930s. Russian revolution has exerted an even higher form of liberating effect but by the first Soviet Writers' Congress of 1934, the scenario had changed. The soviet socialism was dominated by Leninist thought instead of Marxian or Englesian. Lenin had advocated literature as an instrument of Party as early as 1905. Now the experimentation was strictly prohibited. At 1934 Congress, James Joyce's *Ulysses* was denounced as "a heap of dung crawling with worms".

George Steiner divides Marxism into two forms Englesian Marxism versus Leninist Marxism. One free from direct political determinism and other explicitly committed to the political cause of the social democratic party. But simultaneously, in 1930s an underground variety of rich Englesian criticism flourished in Soviet Union. This came to be known as Russian Formalism. The most prominent members of the group were Victor Shklovsky, Boris Tomashevsky and Boris Eichenbaum. After disbanding by the party, they

survived and prospered in exile in Prague. Their ideas included the need of close formal analysis of the text and the difference between poetic language and ordinary language. Shklovsky's idea of defamiliarization and Tomashevsky's distinction between story and plot were historic contributions of the school to the theory of literature. Both the concepts emphasized the literary treatment of real and ordinary to make it artistic. Formalist ideas were of great interest to the early Structuralists partly because of their distinction between language and reality and partly because of their viewing literature as a set of systematic procedures and structures.

Some of the Marxist exiles of Soviet Union, at loggerheads with the Leninist ideas, worked in exile to bring about new forms of Marxist criticism which during their evolution created new paradigms in literary theory. Roman Jakobson was one such Marxist theorist in exile in Prague. He founded the Prague School of Linguistic Circle, the members of which included Rene Wellek. Wellek migrated to America before the outbreak of war and was influential in the movement known as New Criticism. As a consequence, there are a number of concepts common to Russian Formalists and New Critics especially those concerning the need for close verbal analysis of literary texts and the special recognition of literary language as a medium with its own characteristics that set it aside from day to day language (Peter Barry). In Germany too, the suppressed Marxists were precursors of a new thought which came to be known as Frankfurt School. This school is noteworthy in combining together the aspects of Marxism with those of Psychoanalysis of Sigmund Freud. The prominent names associated with this school are Walter Benjamin, Herbert Marcuse and Theodore Adorno.

Thus it is observed that since the 1970s, Marxism proper has undergone fundamental changes. There are new blends of literary theory which combine Marxism and Feminism, Marxism and structuralism, Marxism and Post-structuralism and Marxism with Psychoanalysis. A pure basic monolithic

Marxism is a thing of bygone years and these developments have only affirmed the Hegelian dialectics.

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