

## **Marxism and Literary Theory**

Marxism is a materialist philosophy which tried to interpret the world based on the concrete, natural world around us and the society we live in. It is opposed to idealist philosophy which conceptualizes a spiritual world elsewhere that influences and controls the material world. In one sense it tried to put people's thought into reverse gear as it was a total deviation from the philosophies that came before it. Karl Marx himself has commented on this revolutionary nature of Marxism, "The philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways; the point is to change it." It is true that while other philosophies tried to understand the world, Marxism tried to change it.

According to Marxism, society progresses through the struggle between opposing forces. It is this struggle between opposing classes that result in social transformation. History progresses through this class struggle. Class struggle originates out of the exploitation of one class by another throughout history. During the feudal period the tension was between the feudal lords and the peasants, and in the Industrial age the struggle was between the capitalist class (the bourgeoisie) and the industrial working class (the proletariat). Classes have common interests. In a capitalist system the proletariat is always in conflict with the capitalist class. This confrontation, according to Marx, will finally result in replacing the system by socialism.

Another important concept used by Marx was the dialectic which was originally developed by the 18th century German philosopher Hegel. Hegel was an idealist philosopher who used this term to refer to the process of emergence of new ideas through the confrontation of opposing ideas. He believed that the world is governed by thought and material existence is the expression of an immaterial spiritual essence. But Marx used the same concept to interpret the progress of the material world. According to him Hegel put the world upside down by giving primacy to ideas whereas Marx's attempt was to reverse it. So Marx's dialectic is known as dialectical materialism. Marx argued that all mental (ideological) systems are products of real social and economic existence. For example, the legal system reflects the interests of the dominant class in particular historical periods rather than the manifestation of divine reason. Marxist dialectic can be understood as the science of the general and abstract laws of development of nature, society and thoughts. It considers the universe as an integral whole in which things are interdependent, rather than a mixture of things isolated from each other. All things contain within themselves internal dialectical

contradictions, which are the primary cause of motion, change and development in the world. Dialectical materialism was an effective tool in the hands of Marxists, in revealing the secrets behind the social processes and their future course of development.

One of the fundamental concepts of classical Marxist thought is the concept of base and superstructure which refers to the relationship between the material means of production and the cultural world of art and ideas. It is essentially a symbolic concept which employed the structure of a building to explain this relationship. The foundation or the base stands for the socio-economic relations and the mode of production and the superstructure stands for art, law, politics, religion and, above all, ideology. Broadly speaking it refers to the idea that culture is governed by historical conditions and the relations of dominance and subordination prevalent in a particular society. Morality, religion, art and philosophy are seen as echoes of real life processes. In Marx's own words, they are "phantoms formed in the brains of men." From this point of view all cultural products are directly related to the economic base in a given society.

Take the case of the novels of Mulk Raj Anand which address the life of the untouchables, coolies and ordinary workers struggling for their rights and self esteem. It is true that they can be traced back to the class conflict prevalent in the Indian society M.T. Vasudevan Nair, a noted Malayalam novelist wrote about the breaking up of the feudal tharavads in Kerala. But in the final analysis his stories reveal the filtering of the bourgeois modernity in Kerala society and how it enters into a conflictual relationship with the values of feudalism. Thus traces of this connection can be identified in various forms of cultural production.

### *Socialist Realism*

Socialist Realism took shape as the official aesthetic principle of the new communist society. It was mainly informed by the 19th century aesthetics and revolutionary politics. Raymond Williams identifies three principles as the founding principles of Socialist realism. They are Partinost or commitment to the working class cause of the party, Narodnost of popularity and Klassovost or writer's commitment to the class interests. The idea of Partinost is based on Vladimir Lenin's essay, Party Organisation and Party Literature (1905) which reiterates the commitment of the writer to the aim of the party to liberate the working class from exploitation. Narodnost refers to the popular simplicity of the work of art. Marx, in Paris Manuscripts, refers to the alienation that originates out of the separation of the mental and manual in the capitalist society. Earlier under feudalism the workers engaged in cottage

industries produced various items on their own, all activities related to the production happening at the same place under the supervision of the same people. But under capitalism the workers lost control over their products they were engaged in the production of various parts and were alienated from their own work. So, only folk art survived as people's art. The concept Narodnost reiterates this quality of popular art which is accessible to the masses and wanted to restore their lost wholeness of being. Klassovost refers to the commitment of the writer to the interests of the working class. It is not related to the explicit allegiance of a writer to a particular class but the writer's inherent ability to portray the social transformation.

For example, Balzac, a supporter of Bourbon dynasty, provides a penetrating account of the French society than all the historians. Though Tolstoy, the Russian novelist, was an aristocrat by birth and had no affiliation to the revolutionary movements in Russia, Lenin called Tolstoy the "mirror of Russian revolution" as he was successful in revealing the transformation in Russian society that led to the revolution through his novels. Lenin's position regarding art and literature was harder than that of Marx and Friedrich Engels. He argued that literature must become an instrument of the party. In the 1934 congress of Soviet Writers, Socialist Realism was accepted as the official aesthetic principle of Soviet Union. It was accepted as a dogma by communists all over the world.

Thus with the declaration of official literary policy by Soviet Union the "Moscow Line" was popularized and got international acceptance among communists. As a result, a direct cause-effect relationship between literature and economics was assumed, with all writers seen as trapped within the intellectual limit of their class position. One of the examples of this rigid Marxist literary criticism is *Illusion and Reality* by Christopher Caudwell. However establishing a one to one relationship between base and superstructure as some "vulgar Marxists" may attempt, is opposed by the Marxist critic, Terry Eagleton. According to him, "each element of a society's superstructure, art, law, politics, and religion has its own tempo of development, its own internal evolution, which is not reducible to a mere expression of the class struggle or the state of the economy." Yet classical Marxists claim that in the last analysis the superstructure is determined by that mode of production. The Hungarian Marxist critic Georg Lukacs represented this type of political orthodoxy. Lukacs considered the 19th century realist fiction as a model and believed that a realist work must reveal the underlying pattern of contradictions in a social order. His debate with Bertolt Brecht on the whole questions of realism and expressionism discussed in detail the importance of form and the

concept of form in Marxist criticism. The debate was handed over to the Formalists who developed new directions in the development of Marxist criticism.

### *Developments in Marxist Aesthetics*

Marxist criticism flourished outside the official line in various European countries. Russian Formalism emerged as a new perspective informed by Marxism in the 1920s. It was disbanded by the Communist party as it did not conform to the official theoretical perspective of the party. The prominent members of this group were Victor Shklovsky, Boris Tomashevsky and Boris Eichenbaum, who published their ideas originally in Russian *Formalist Criticism: Four Essays*, edited by Lee T. Lemon and Marion J Reis.

Though suppressed in Soviet Union, the Formalists emerged in various forms in the USA, Germany and Prague. One of the members of this group, Mikhail Bakhtin remained in Soviet Union and continued his critical practice. His concept of Dialogism affirmed plurality and variety. It was an argument against the hegemony of absolute authorial control. He affirmed the need to take others and otherness into account. In one sense, it was an argument against the increasing homogenization of cultural and political life in Soviet Union.

Many others belonging to the same perspective went into exile and continued their work abroad. It was the beginning of a new form of Marxist criticism. Roman Jakobson founded the Prague Linguistic Circle along with Rene Wellek and a few others. In Germany the Frankfurt School of Marxist aesthetics was founded in 1923 as a political research institute attached to the University of Frankfurt. Walter Benjamin, Theodor Adorno and Herbert Marcuse were some of the important figures attached with this school. They tried to combine aspects of Formalism with the theories of Marx and Freud. They produced for the first time studies on mass culture and communication and their role in social reproduction and domination. The Frankfurt School also generated one of the first models of a critical cultural studies that analyzes the processes of cultural production and political economy, the politics of cultural texts, and audience reception and use of cultural artifacts.

Marxist scholars like Walter Benjamin and Bertolt Brecht considered art as a social production. Walter Benjamin's essay, *The Author as Producer* (1934) addresses the question, "What is the literary work's position within the relations of production of its time?" Benjamin tries to argue that artistic production depends upon certain techniques of production which are part of the productive forces of art like the publishing, theatrical presentation and so on. A

revolutionary artist should not uncritically accept the existing forces of artistic production, but should develop and revolutionize those forces. It helps in the creation of new social relations between artist and audience. In this process, authors, readers and spectators become collaborators. The experimental theatre developed by Brecht is a realization of Benjamin's concept. Bertolt Brecht, a close friend of Benjamin, developed the concept of Epic Theatre which dismantled the traditional naturalistic theatre and produced a new kind of theatre altering the functional relations between stage and audience, text and producer, and producer and actor. Bourgeois theatre is based on illusionism. The audience is the passive consumer. The play does not stimulate them to think constructively. According to Brecht this is based on the assumption that the world is fixed, given and unchangeable and the duty of art is to provide escapist entertainment. Brecht's famous contribution is alienation effect. The technique is to alienate the spectators from the performance and to prevent them from emotionally identifying with the play. It presents the familiar experience in unfamiliar light forcing the audience to question the attitudes which was considered to be natural and unchanging. He employed techniques like back projection, song choreography cutting and disrupting the action rather than blending it smoothly.

The French Marxist thinker, Louis Althusser further developed the Marxist approach through the introduction of various concepts like over determination, Ideology etc. Over determination refers to an effect which arises from various causes rather than from a single factor. This concept undercuts simplistic notions of one to one correspondence between base and superstructure. Ideology is another term modified by Althusser. According to him "ideology is a system of representations endowed with an existence and an historical role at the heart of a given society." It obscures social reality by naturalizing beliefs and by promoting values that support it. The civil society spreads ideology through the law, textbooks, religious rituals and norms so that the people imbibe them even without their knowledge. Ideology is instituted by the state through two apparatuses, Repressive State Apparatuses (RSA) and Ideological State Apparatuses (ISA). The RSA includes law courts, prison, police, army etc and the ISA include political parties, schools, media, churches, family, art etc. Althusser imported structuralism to Marxism. In his view, society is a structural whole which consists of relatively autonomous levels: legal, political and cultural whose mode of articulation is only determined by the economy.

The founder of Italian communist Party, Antonio Gramsci was a politician, political theorist, linguist and philosopher. Known as an original thinker among Marxist scholars, Gramsci

introduced the concepts like Hegemony and the Subaltern. Hegemony is the domination of particular section of the society by the powerful classes. Most often it works through consent rather than by power. It is the moral and intellectual leadership of the upper class in a particular society. The term subaltern was originally used by Gramsci as a collective description for a variety of different and exploited groups who lack class consciousness. But now it is being used to represent all marginalized sections like Dalits, women, minorities etc.

An influential figure among the New Left was Raymond Williams. His writings on politics, culture, the mass media and literature are a significant contribution to the Marxist critique of culture and the arts. Williams was interested in the relationship between language, literature and society. He coined the critical method, Cultural Materialism which has four characteristics, Historical context, Theoretical method, Political /commitment and Textual analysis. Cultural materialism gives us different perspectives based on what we choose to suppress or reveal in reading from the past.

Cultural Materialism argues that culture is a constitutive social progress which actively creates different ways of life. Similarly creation of meaning is viewed as a practical material activity which cannot be consigned to a secondary level. Another important concept in Williams thought is Structures of feeling. They are values that are changing and being formed as we live and react to the material world around us. They subject to change. Williams contributed much for the development of Marxist aesthetics through his studies on culture. His most important works include *The Country and the City* (1973), in which chapters about literature alternate with chapters on social history. His tightly written *Marxism and Literature* (1977) is mainly for specialists, but it also sets out his own approach to cultural studies which he called cultural materialism.

Fredric Jameson, an American Marxist intellectual focused on critical theory and was influenced by Kenneth Burke, Gyorgy Lukacs, Ernst Bloch, Theodor Adorno, Frankfurt School, Louis Althusser and Sartre. He viewed cultural criticism as an integral feature of Marxist theory. This position represented a break with more orthodox Marxism, which held a narrow view of historical materialism. In some ways Jameson has been concerned, along with other Marxist cultural critics such as Terry Eagleton to articulate Marxism's relevance in respect to current philosophical and literary trends. In 1969, Jameson co-founded the Marxist Literary Group with a number of his graduate students at the University of California. His major works include *Marxism and Form: Twentieth-Century Dialectical Theories of*

Literature (1971) and *The Prison-House of Language: A Critical Account of Structuralism and Russian Formalism* (1972). History came to play an increasingly central role in Jameson's interpretation of both the reading (consumption) and writing (production) of literary texts. Jameson marked his full-fledged commitment to Hegelian-Marxist philosophy with the publication of *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (1981), the opening slogan of which is "always historicize" .

Apart from Jameson, contemporary Marxist critics like Terry Eagleton, Professor of English Literature at the University of Lancaster, England and Aijaz Ahmad, a well known Marxist thinker and political commentator from India have significant contributions in the field of Marxist theory and aesthetics. Aijaz Ahmad's famous work, *In Theory: Classes, Nations, Literatures* (1992) contained Marxist analysis of the concepts like Third World Literature and Orientalism. Eagleton on the other hand published more than 40 books which include *Literary Theory: An Introduction* (1983), *The Ideology of the Aesthetic* (1990), and *The Illusions of Postmodernism* (1996). Marxist thought have undergone huge transformation over the years befitting to the claim of Marx that change is the only unchanging phenomena in this world. It has been the backbone of almost all modern theories of culture and criticism. It may be a paradox that while Marxist practices have received set backs in recent years Marxist theory has been widely accepted all over the world.