

Marxist Approach to Literature: An Introduction

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ABSTRACT

In the 20th century, literary criticism has witnessed influences from many schools of critical inquiry. One of the major schools is Marxist literary criticism. This paper highlights the major tenets of Marxist literary criticism. In other words, it studies the Marxist approach to literature.

KEYWORDS

Literary criticism; Formalism; Marxism.

Introduction

Twentieth-century literary criticism has been influenced by Marxist ideologies. To Marxism, literature belongs to the superstructure which is a product of the base realities. The Marxist approach relates the literary text to the society, to the history and cultural and political systems in which it is created. It does not consider a literary text, devoid of its writer and the influences on the writer. A writer is a product of his age which is itself a product of many ages. Bakha's struggle in the *Untouchable* of Mulk Raj Anand and Balaram Halwai's struggle in Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger* depicts the social realities in India where social class has been playing a vital role. Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* describes the history of colonizers, their politics with the natives, and the white domination over the natives of Africa. Many such literary pieces witness the social-historical and political processes which happen in the real world.

Discussion

At the outset let me consider Marxism and literature as synonymous with existence and essence. How one exists and why is the answer to why one exists and how. When one thinks about the Marxist approach to literature, the existential approach comes to one's mind. Both target the base realities of life, but the first one finds order, a law, and logic in the world, and the latter one finds irrationality, disorder, and uncertainty in the world where we live. Both approaches look at life as it is lived by humans in this world.

In Sartre's words, existentialism is "an ideological moment within Marxism". We can recall the essay Search for a Method in Jean Paul Sartre's *The Critique of Dialectical Reason* (1960) where he declared that existentialism has become a subordinate branch of Marxism and will enrich it. Historical changes are due to the material realities of life or lives, not because of the ideological superstructure. Human existence in the real world determines who is that human, what he/she thinks, and why. A literary text exists in social-historical cultural and

political contexts. It is also an outcome of these contexts that a writer experiences during a period. 'The history of all hitherto existing societies is the history of class struggle' says Marx in the *Communist Manifesto* (1848). In a Marxist approach to literature, we have the following factors which need to be discussed:

- A. There is a class history and class struggle in a literary text.
- B. The struggle is there means there is domination and oppression. And in that, someone has to win and someone has to defeat. It belongs to a particular society and culture.
- C. There are influential factors like political motives behind the production of a text. (the text is for whom? and why?)

So, the social-historical political and cultural conditions behind literary texts need to be discussed when we are looking at a text through the Marxist approach. To Marx, the literature belongs to the superstructure and should reflect the base realities. In *Das Capital* (1867), Marx writes that 'the mode of production of material life determines altogether the social, political, and intellectual life process. It is not the consciousness of men that determines their being but on the contrary their social being that determines their consciousness.' The background in which something is written decides what to be written and about whom to be written. What is written? Why it is written? And, how it is written? are the questions that need attention in the Marxist approach to literature.

After the October 1917 revolution, the Marxist approach to literature became dominant and was defined in the light of socialist realism. Andrei Sinyavsky defined socialist realism as

...the basic method of Soviet literature and literary criticism. It demands of the artist the truthful, historically concrete representation of reality in its

revolutionary development. Moreover, the truthfulness and historical concreteness of the artistic representation of reality must be linked with the task of ideological transformation and education of workers in the spirit of socialism (Sinyavsky, 1934).

This approach took the life struggle of the working class, whether in farming or factory or any other field, into account. It described them as they were when they were working when they were struggling when they were achieving their goals. Such ideas of socialist realism inspired literature and in Russia, it generated a belief that writing is influenced by both the author's subjective factors and the influence she/he receives from her/his surroundings. Socio-political and economical factors influence the form and content of a writing.

Marx and Engels considered literature as a product of the base structure. In other words, literature, culture, law, religion, etc are in the superstructure as defined by Marx and Engels. According to Marx, the base structure determines the superstructure predominantly. It is also possible that the superstructure influences the base and this is why Raymond Williams considered both the structures as mutually influencing each other (Williams, 1977). The base includes all the necessary conditions behind a production. To Abrams, Marxists view literature

not as works created in accordance with timeless artistic criteria, but as 'products' of the economic and ideological determinants specific to that era (Abrams 149).

According to Terry Eagleton, the English critic, and Cultural theorist, it is not only concerned with how novels get published and whether they mention the working class but also gives sensitive attention to its forms, styles, and

meanings as the product of a particular history. Terry says that a text cannot know itself, so Marxist criticism tries to explore the hidden necessary conditions which make the text possible.

Marxist criticism has been critical of the so-called Formalism which considers a work of art as an independent entity (form determines the content, not the writer, not the sociohistorical background). It is Leon Trotsky, a Russian Marxist revolutionary theorist, asserted that the form of art is independent, but the artist, the writer, and the user or the spectator who is enjoying it, are not empty machines. They are living people, with crystallized psychology representing a certain unity, even if not entirely harmonious. This psychology is the result of social conditions. He summarizes the questions which are to be asked in a Marxist approach to literature as follows:

To which order of feelings does a given artistic work correspond in all its peculiarities? What are the social conditions of these thoughts and feelings? What place do they occupy in the historic development of a society and of a class? And, further, what literary heritage has entered into the elaboration of the new form? Under the influence of what historic impulse have the new complexes of feelings and thoughts broken through the shell which divides them from the sphere of

poetic consciousness? (Trotsky, 1923)

The Marxist approach also studies the social class to which an author belongs and the effects of the author on her/his society. It explores how the author has interpreted society, culture, and political systems. It emphasizes the social reality, it does not give importance to the aesthetics of a text.

Conclusion

If I can use a quote like Descartes' cogito ergo sum (I think, therefore I am), to describe Marxism, I should say, I am, therefore I think. Firstly, I come into existence, and then I can think. This is why; we can consider Existentialism as an extended Marxism. Existence includes a history, a culture, and a time that determine who someone is or what something is. The foundation of the Marxist approach to literature is very strong in reality. There is no literature, where there is no subjectivity. Literary texts are woven around the experience of the human who exists and the existence of many things which human perceives. Our living world can be compartmentalized as society, history, culture, and politics under one big unstable compartment called time. And no literary text and writer can bypass any of these compartments. This is what a Marxist approach does and it is relevant today and will be relevant tomorrow also.

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