

Marxism and Its Impact on Literature

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Abstract

In 20th century, literary criticism has witnessed influences from many schools of critical inquiries. Marxist literary criticism is one of the major schools. Karl Marx was a socialist, philosopher and economist in the nineteenth century. He is best known for his work, *The Communist Manifesto*, which he produced in collaboration with Friedrich Engels. Marxist philosophy has profoundly shaped twentieth century literature. The aim of this study to analyzes Karl Marx's influence reading and understanding literature and to illuminate how various works of literature promote Marxist notions of historical materialism, ideology, and proletarian revolution. In contrast others use fiction as a means to resist communist philosophy. Marxist criticism has represented the major strands of theory within the field of English literary studies. The purpose of this paper is to study the works of individual Marxist literary theorists whose works have had a direct impact on how literature is read and understood.

Keywords: *Marx, twentieth century literature, communist, ideology, historical, materialism*

Introduction

Like many other literary theories, Marxist theory is an important literary theory. This literary theory is a product of Marxist theory but Karl Marx did not produce it. Marxist literary theory is a derivative discourse. Since it is a derivative discourse, it poses two problems. First problem-Marxist literary theory refers back to Marxist political economy. Consequently, the study of Marxist literary theory becomes the study of Marxist economics which doesn't have any direct relevance to literary studies. Second problem-The individual literary theorists borrow different things from Marx which makes it difficult to summarize all Marxist literary ideas into one study. The best possible way of dealing with Marxist literary theory amidst the plethora of ideas is to study the work of individual with reference to Marxist theory. We need to be selective while studying the works of individual Marxist literary theorists. We need to study the works of individual literary theorists whose works have had a direct impact on literature.

Bertolt Brecht, Reymond Williams, Louis Althusser and Antonio Gramsci are the important theorist in Marxist literary criticism. But before we dwell upon literary theory of these theorists, we need to look over the tenets of Marxism. Marx had read the philosophy of Greek like Democritus and Epicurus before focusing his attention on political economy. In 1859 his first major work on economy was published under the title *Contribution to a Critique of Political Economy*. Some other texts which he produced in collaboration with other thinkers like *The Economic and Political Manuscripts* and *The German Ideology* are considered as preparatory exercises for his magnum opus *Das Capital*.

Marx begins his book *Das Capital* with a discussion of commodity. Commodity is something we buy from market. It means that we buy it from market and whatever we buy from market is commodity. Commodity is something that satisfies our need and it has utility value. Money in Marxist theory is a meditating agent. Marx identifies commodity through its two aspects - its usability and its exchangeability. Marx argues that the value of a commodity derives from combining together these two contradictory values. According to Marx, it is a labour time. All commodities become commodities through the expenditure of a certain amount of labour. Marx shows that the value of a commodity is ultimately dependent on a

combination of use value and exchange value.

Bertolt Brecht

Bertolt Brecht is the most important Marxist critic in literature. He was a dramatist who had propagated Marxist ideology in literature. Brecht produced some of his most well-known plays like *Mother Courage and Her Children*, *The Life of Galileo*, *The Good Woman of Setzuan*, and *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*. When Brecht made his first appearance as dramatist, he started by expressing his collective disillusionment of his generation with realities of bourgeois civilization by developing a strikingly new form of drama which he referred to as epic theatre. This epic theatre became one of the strongest forms of aesthetic manifestation in 20th century. It is important here to mention Brecht's innovation of epic theatre. By coining this particular term epic theatre, he was actually drawing the distinction between epic and tragedy which is found in Aristotle's Poetics. The key effect of tragedy is catharsis. To achieve catharsis whether it is purgation of emotion or education of audience's emotion, there is a need for an audience to identify with the characters and their actions on stage. This identification is the pleasure which audience derives from art. We like a movie or drama because we identify ourselves with the fate of the hero or heroine and feel happy when something good happens to the character and feel devastated when something wrong happens to them. Brecht tries to achieve to break the sense of identification between audience and character and actions through his epic theatre.

Louis Althusser

Althusser as a young man was not only interested in communism and in Marxist philosophy but was also deeply steeped in Catholicism. Indeed, the early part of his career was marked by an effort to synthesize his Christian beliefs with the tenets of Marxism. As a philosopher and as a Marxist, Althusser proposes an analysis of Marxist theory which has far-reaching implications both for the nature of philosophy and for the nature of Marxism. The influence of his analysis can be seen in a variety of fields, and its consequences have been felt and continue to be felt even beyond the boundaries of the purely theoretical discussion within which he largely confines himself.

In the first instance, Althusser's concerns are philosophical. Of his two major works, the first, *Pour Marx* (Paris, 1965), translated as *For Marx* (London, 1969), is a collection of related works which aim to develop Marxist philosophical concepts from the neglected and underdeveloped state in which they have appeared to have been left. The second, *Lire le Capital* (Paris, 1965), translated as *Reading Capital* (London, 1970), is a study undertaken collectively by a group of younger followers, which seeks to uncover and elaborate the philosophical principles underlying Marx's major work, *Capital*. Taken together, these works offer a series of new definitions of what philosophy is, and a reformulation of the Marxist theory of society and history.

Althusser proposes in his essay **“Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses” (1970)** is that ideology has a political angle to it and acts as an adhesive that relates one to a particular state. This means that in order to make someone a functioning subject of that state the state power needs to situate him or her within the capitalist mode of production. In other words, the state needs to create a role for that someone which would make his subjugation to the capitalist mode of production seem not only justified but also eternal and natural. For instance, take the case of a factory worker within a capitalist state. Though the worker sells his labour at a rate that is less than the value that he produces for the industrialist which results in the latter's profit, the worker might think of this unfair exchange as quite legitimate. This is because the state through its various institutions like family, school, religious establishments, media, publication houses, succeeds in developing in the factory worker an ideological consciousness which allows him to regard his subject position as an exploited labourer to be “natural”. These various institutions through which the

ideology is developed in an individual that allows him to smoothly fit in to the state and its underlying mode of economic production is referred to by Althusser as the Ideological State Apparatuses. This he contrasts with the repressive state apparatuses which include things like the police, the law court, and the prison – things by which the state controls its subject through violence. In contrast, with the ideological state apparatuses, the state interpellates, or creates for individuals, specific subject positions by molding their consciousness of their selves. But according to Althusser, this too is a mode of control which is more subtle and at the same time more pervasive than the brute violence exercised by the repressive state apparatuses.

Antonio Gramsci

To understand the politics of how ideology works within the society let us move from Althusser to another Marxist theorist, Antonio Gramsci and his concept of hegemony. As part of the communist movement in Italy, Gramsci sought to rethink various aspects of Marxism from within the local Italian context and also with added inputs provided by the Bolshevik revolution in Russia and Lenin's revisionary reading of Marx. Ironically enough, it was while in prison that Gramsci's intellectual activities flourished and he produced elaborate notes on various aspects of Marxism, of world history and of the Italian society. These notes which filled more than 30 copies and 3000 pages were later published under the name *Quaderni del carcere* or Prison Notebooks, and this today forms the basis of our understanding of Gramsci and his concepts like hegemony.

The term hegemony is primarily used to mean *dominance with consent*. A dominant class within any given society enjoys their dominance chiefly through the exercise of hegemony which signifies an ideological dominance rather than a physical dominance. The dominant class within a state exercises its leadership in two ways – through civil society, which is the domain of hegemony building, and through political society. The civil society constitutes of pretty much what Althusser identifies as the Ideological State apparatus that is of educational institutions, religious institutions, publication industry, media etc. In this domain the intellectuals of the dominant class convinces the rest of the society that the dominant class serves not just its own interest but the interest of all other classes as well. This helps the dominant class gain consent of the rest of the society and exercise control through hegemony. The political society which constitutes of what Althusser identifies as the Repressive State Apparatus however comes to the forefront with all its coercive force only when hegemony fails, that is when the dominant class fails to convince others that their interest is being taken care of. However, the political society with its governance structure and legal institutions cannot function for long if there is no hegemonic control that would make the society accept a particular government or a particular set of laws. So ultimately it is hegemony that is of paramount importance as far as dominance is concerned.

Reymond Williams

Reymond Williams had a profound political and cultural influence upon him in his growing up. Williams was born and brought up within working class-culture and this connected him with British labour politics and with Marxism. Under the impact of Marxism he produced important theoretical writings like *Culture and Society*, *The Long Revolution*, and *The Country and the City*. The most popular idea of Williams is the concept of structure of feeling which he introduced in his book *Preface to Film* and he went on to rephrase it again and again in works like *The Long Revolution* and *Marxism and Literature*. This long preoccupation with the idea suggests that Williams considered it to be a key concept which required regular reiteration.

The complexity of the Idea can be proven through an example. Hegemony is a form of control that the dominant class exercises over the society by transforming their particular ideology into agreeable

worldview. Other words heavy money is achieved through naturalization and universalization of a dominant ideology and a dominant culture. Williams complicates the study of dominant ideology biogas using that in any society and at a given point in time, the dominant ideology is situated in a state of tension with two other forms of ideology or culture. The first he calls the residual culture and the second he calls the emergent culture. Williams points out that each dominant ideological formation becomes dominant by replacing by existing a set of dominant ideological formation

For instance, the bourgeois ideology of capitalist mode production became hegemonic only after bourgeois replacing the dominance of feudal ideology. But feudal ideology didn't disappear altogether. Some elements of feudal ideology still remained active even in the era of dominance. Similarly the monarchy still survives in Britain even in an age of bourgeois dominance. These surviving parts of older ideology is w Williams characterizes as residual.

Williams makes a distinction between "residual" and "archaic". He says that archaic is wholly recognize as an element of past. In contrast to this, residual is formed in the past but it is still active in cultural process, not only as an element of past but an effective element of the present.

Conclusion

The Marxist approach to literature is rooted in reality. There is no literature without subjectivity. Literary texts are woven around the human experience and everything else that is perceived by the human experience. In our living world, history, culture, and politics can all be compartmentalized within the same big unstable compartment called time. No literary text or writer can elude these compartments. In this way, a Marxist approach is relevant today and will continue to be relevant tomorrow.

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