Marxism and Literature: An Overview

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Abstract: Marxism gives a new dimension to the study of literature by laying stress upon the importance of history within which various social and cultural trends emerge. It helps us to gain a practical and systematic world view by devoting self to the intense study of history. It evaluates the modern society from a unique prism of master-slave view— Bourgeoisie and Proletariat. The account of the horrid tale of proletariat’s oppression is recorded well in the seminal works of Karl Marx like Das Capital, The Communist Manifesto, The German Ideology and so on. A literary artist is deeply affected by the social, economic and political upheavels in the society and tries to give a true account of it in his literary works. Marxism helps the artist to unravel the self interest of the bourgeoisie by putting an end to the patriarchal and feudal idyllic relations which shook the ecstatics of brutal exploitation coated with religious fervor and sentimentalism.

In this paper, an attempt has been made to understand the bond between literature and Classical Marxism. It is argued that Classical Marxism holds a testimony to the historical point of view as it strives for the self-emancipation of the working class which is subject to the ruthless oppression by bourgeoisie. The paper contends that the ruling ideas are no less than the futile ideal expression of dominant material relationships and the hegemonic forces should not intervene with the pristine literary ideas according to Marxist critics. The impact of Classical Marxism on literature in general will be assessed and evaluated in the historical and social context.

Keywords: Marxism

Marxism gives a new dimension to the study of literature by laying stress upon the importance of history within which various social and cultural trends emerge. Conflict emerges as the basic driving force of history. It is their specific development within the framework of capitalism which creates the economic conditions for revolutionary change in which the industrial class serves as the main agent. History can be divided into distinct stages or modes of production. The capitalist mode of production serves as the transitory form which is destined to be superseded by a much higher socialist stage of society. Marx has located the economic phenomenon within the wider social and historical context as follows:

In the social production of their existence, men inevitably enter into definite relations, which are independent of their will, namely relations of production appropriate to a given stage in the development of their material forces of production. The totality of these relations of production constitutes the economic structure of society, the real foundation, on which arises a legal and political superstructure…The mode of production of material life conditions the general process of social, political and intellectual life.

(Marx 20-1)

Thus, history emerges as an integral element in Marx’s theory of class struggle. History is transformation of thesis, antithesis and synthesis which was postulated by Hegel and the young Hegelians of the early nineteenth century. In other words, man is perpetually battling with the hardships and conflicts which lead to the transformation of his current existence (e.g., the thesis) and such conflict pave way for his spiritual freedom.

In Hegelian sense, it is this conflict which produces the spiritual truth (synthesis) through this dialect of thesis-antithesis-synthesis. It was this framework which Marx saw in Hegal which helped him to transplant it into the realm of economic relations. It will be apt to say that it was this role of Hegelian dialectic which helped Marx to see the movement of history. That movement is defined in terms of class struggle within and between each generation. For Marx, that class struggle is shaped within a dialectic that has its genesis in how the forces and means of production leave an indelible impression on the class-consciousness of each class. New emerging alternative is culminated in this class struggle. For instance; In England, the struggle of the feudal class with the democratic trends is a prominent case to be stated. The real impact of this clash is stated by Andrew Milner, “ By the seventeenth century the subordinate capitalist mode of production had developed to the point at which it came into clear contradiction with the dominant feudal mode” (Milner 66). The pertinent point over
here is that the confrontation leave a direct and very strong impact on the economic mode of production that is very important element of socio-economic reality. As a result of these clashes, a clef is created between property owners and those who do all the work but don’t own anything. This tale of owning by some and with out property by others has been there from early slave societies to later wage-labor economies. It is this division between classes which culminates into historical change. This historical change influences almost everything that comes into its way from religion to literature.

There is a close relationship of literature, philosophy and religion to the social environment which turns into a strong segment of society like economy. It would not be wrong to say that these are moulded and chiselled by those active men and women in our society who have given themselves completely in the process of changing faiths, values or norms in their environment. Actually, they can be labelled as “constructs” who serve as prototypes for people whom they follow. Since, they are constructs, so they are constantly under watch by the privileged section in society in order to safeguard their own class security and safety in the existing order. Quite conversely, the writers whose ideas seem to upset the existing order of the elite section of the society with their ideas and imaginative representations are looked at unkindly. There are innumerable examples of thinkers, artists and writers who are victims of state repression like South African writers—Dennis Brutus, Ezekile Mphahlele, Bloke Modisane, Alex La Guma, Mazisi Kunene, Lewis Nkosi and Can Themba.

It can be asserted that history does surely serve as the food for writer’s thought. So, the changing relation of production including power relations is the forte which attracts the writer most. Politics or say power politics is undoubtedly the literary territory. Marxism helps to comprehend the relationship between the writer and his society. The sensitivity of the writer helps him to fathom the urge among people to celebrate, revel and take part in the social discourse. This surely does make the writer to jot down the human emotions of joy, melancholy, fury and so on. So, the writer’s response is firmly rooted in the social milieu to which he belongs. However, this is not the point where the Marxism halts but it takes conditions to the specific mode of production which shapes the economic structure that ultimately regulates the activity of men and women in an authoritative way. All this incites the writer’s imaginative faculty and literature which is the product of writer’s imaginative involvement becomes a reflection of society: its class formation, conflicts, contradictions, structure of values, cultural struggles and its economic structure. Hence, we should be highly debted to literature as it has provided us with a crystal clear insights by capturing the moving spirit of an era artistically in comparison to all the historical and political documents.

Marxism which has left an indelible impression on literature is nothing but the manifestation of the gradual impact on it by Classical Marxism. So, it is very important that the historical impact of classical marxism should be ascertained and acknowledged as there in lies the firm foundation of the Socialist movement. Marx gave two exceptional insights which carry the kernel of Marxism: one, that economics is the chief form of human alienation and two, humanity is to be liberated from the ruthless clutches of economical influences. Marx used these ideas in order to lay the basis of systematic and practical world view by devoting self to the intense study of history which developed into the materialistic conception of history and came to be known as historical materialism. It was developed into a manuscript, The German Ideology (1846) which states that the material conditions which determine the production process effect the overall conditions of individuals. He predicted the collapse of industrial capitalism by tracing the various modes of production in history. The herald of a new era was marked by The Communist Manifesto (1969), which is virtually a call to action. It evaluates the modern society from a different prism of master-slave view: bourgeoisie and proletariat. Marx has captured the relation between material existence and its impact in following words:

Does it require deep intuition to comprehend that man’s ideas, views, and conception, in one word, man’s consciousness, changes with every change in the conditions of his material existence, in his social relations and in his social life? What else does the history of ideas prove, than that intellectual production changes its character in proportion as material production is changed? The ruling ideas of each age have ever been the ideas of its ruling class.

(Marx 15)

Certainly, this work of Marx heralds the coming of pleasant change by its adoption of resolute ideas which proclaim the supremacy of proletariat, the ruling class of future who will be the source of development and prosperity for all. This seminal work of Marx brought revolution in every facet of life including the literary field.

Theories of Surplus Value (1860) and The Grundrisse (1941) are also of immense worth which discuss capital, wage labor, political economy, the state, foreign trade, world market and so on. Das Capital (1867) analyzed the capitalist process of production which elaborated his version of the labor theory and his conceptions of surplus
value and exploitation which prophesied the collapse of industrial edifice. His account of production and distribution of things in “Wage-Labour and Capital” (Lohnarbeit und Kapital), which began as a series of lectures to workmen in Brussels before appearing in the Neue Rheinische Zeitung in April 1849 is heart-rending:

…but the exercise of labour power, labour, is the worker’s own life-activity, his own expression of life. And this life-activity he sells to another person in order to secure means of subsistence. Thus his life-activity is for him only a means to enable him to exist. He works in order to live. He does not even reckon labour as part of his life. It is a commodity which he has made over to another. Hence, also the product of his activity is not the object of his activity. What he produces for himself is not the silk that he weaves, not the gold that he draws from the mine, not the palace that he builds. What he produces for himself are wages; and silk, gold, palace, resolve themselves for him into a definite quantity of the means of subsistence, perhaps into a cotton jacket, copper coins and a basement dwelling. And the worker who for twelve hours weaves, spins, drills, turns, builds, shovels, breaks the stones, carries, etc—does he consider this twelve hour weaving, spinning, drilling, turning, building, shoveling, stone breaking as an expression of his life, as life? On the contrary, life begins for him where this activity ceases, at the table, in the public house, in bed. The twelve hour labour, on the other hand, has no meaning for him to the table, to the public house, into bed. If the silk worm were to spin, in order to continue its existence as a caterpillar, it would be a complete wage worker...

(Marx 153)

The production mechanism places the members of society in an intricate mode of relation with each other, that of employer and employed where the latter is available as a purchasable commodity for the former.

Marx does not deter from voicing the detrimental effects of the economic mode of production on the psyche of proletarait. The tenth chapter of Capital, “The Working Day” records this horrible account very lucidly. The capitalist greedy attempts to squeeze more labor time out of the workers regardless of the fatigue and mental anguish of a seven year old child who works for fifteen hours a day. These despondent process of the conversion of a proletarait in a mechanical being is discussed in the chapter 3 of the Volume 3 of Karl Marx and Frederick Engels Collected Works “Estranged Labour”:

The worker becomes all the poorer the more wealth he produces, the more his production increases in power and size. The worker becomes an ever cheaper commodity the more commodities he creates. The devaluation of the world of men in direct proportion to the increasing value of the world of things. Labour produces not only commodities: it produces itself and the worker as a commodity— and this at the same rate at which it produces commodities in general.

(Marx 271-272)

Marx was conscious of the denigration bourgeoisie causes to the proletariat and takes a cognizance of the subtle changes that bourgeoisie causes which culminates into the overall destruction of the social fabric. So, all the hidden self-interest of bourgeoisie is unravelled by Marx there by putting an end to the patriarchal and feudal idyllic relations which shook the ecstacies of brutal exploitation coated with religious fervor and sentimentalism. All these works of Marx are important from the historical point of view as they strive for the self-emancipation of the working class which is subjected to all forms of inhuman domination by bourgeoisie. The works propogate that our lives are determined by the historical and social contexts in which we are firmly rooted. These works are exemplary as for the first time, the bourgeoisie set-up of society was questioned in the historical context.

Marxist theory projects that society and social organization of a particular time should be viewed in the backdrop of the series of changes taking place in the society. The economic production and distribution cannot be negated as it forms the vital constituent of the organized human life. And, literature cannot escape its influence. For instance; the industrial revolution in England in the second and third decades of the nineteenth century left an indelible impression on literature. All this is beautifully deliminated in Dicken’s novels that the description of poverty and inequality could not have been documented with such artistic precision before. Likewise, George Eliot projects the protagonists in her novels so well that the individuals belonging to middle class with a new kind of sensitivity will find no better description anywhere else. Not only this, but the process of change because of change in economic conditions appear as the recurrent theme in her major fictions.
Also, characters hailing from the upper class are portrayed as insipid and lifeless. Another novelist, Emily Bronte setting her novel, *Wuthering Heights* (1847), in the howling and thundering moors achieves artistic feat by giving a realistic projection to the ruthless and suppressing so-called ethical values of industrial bourgeoisie. The point to be asserted here is that literary works present an altogether novel idea when looked at from the prism of historical developments.

The French novelist Balzac emerges as Marx’s favorite novelist as he presented society differently from the way he perceived it in real life. Balzac as an individual was orthodox and supported the age old moribund feudal class in real life. But as a writer, he was altogether a realistic artist in his works of fiction such as *The Peasants, Old Goriot and Lost Illusions*. Marx expressed his admiration for Balzac in the following words:

In his last novel *The Peasants* [Les Paysans], Balzac—who is altogether distinguished by his deep understanding of real conditions—depicts, with striking exactitude, how the small farmer, in order to keep his usurious creditor well disposed towards him, performs all sorts of services for that creditor and thinks he is not giving anything away because his labour costs him no cash. The usurer, for his part, kills two birds with one single stone. He saves expenditure on wages and enmeshes the farmer, who is driven deeper and deeper into ruin by the withdrawal of labour from his own field, ever more inextricably in the spider’s web of usury.

*(Capital III:31)*

It is the honesty of Balzac as a writer which wins him the admiration of Marx. Marx uses the phrase “triumph of realism” to applaud the objective creativity of Balzac which made him to unfold the stark reality of his times through his writing. Thus, for Marx, it is writing-centered critical analysis which is important rather than the biographical approach.

Equally noteworthy is the trend in the early twentieth century. An intense hatred is expressed for the philistinism and superficiality of culture by poets like W.H Auden, C.D Lewis and Louis Macniece. Samuel Beckett projects the seamless rootlessness of the Post-Second World War period interestingly through two tramps who emerge as symbols of humanity in modern times. When literary works are evaluated from the yard stick of Marxism, they cease to be fables or characters caught in the intricate web of plot structure but instead represent important trends. In this respect, literary works become the pivotal point in which the processes of change lives a crystallized existence.

The allusions from great classics lend unique beauty to Marx’s works. In *Capital I*, he describes the process of appropriation with utmost precision: “Commodities are things and cannot, therefore, resist men. If they be not willingly, he can use force, in other words, he can take them (Marx 99).” In order to hint at the appropriation in literary works, he draws various examples like the lines from Goethe’s ballad, “The Erl-King”, in which an uncanny, elfin spirit threatens a feverish child: “I Love you, your fair form allures me if you are not willing, I shall use force!”...”. Equally commendable are the quotes from the trial scene of Shakespeare’s *The Merchant of Venice* (1600) where British capitalist Shylock’s vicious nature is highlighted: “Ay, his heart; So says the bond.” The quotation from *Timon of Athens* (1623), is used tactically by Marx, when Timon speaks of money as “the common whore of mankind”. It is followed in *Capital I* by another quote from Sophocles *Antigone* (1444):

Money! Money’s the curse of man, none greater! That’s what wrecks cities, banishes men from home, Tempts and deludes the most well-meaning soul. Pointing out the way to infamy and shame...

*(Marx 55)*

Marx’s only aim in using these excerpts from classical writers is to assert that money is no less than a commodity which is prone of becoming the private property of any individual who has the power to own it. With money, follows the social power which certainly becomes the private power of private persons. It is this prime reason which made the ancients to denounce money as it is devoid of the economic and moral order.

Marx puts to question the class-structure of fourteenth century England in notes on J.R Green’s *History of the English People* (1874), by confronting Langaland’s *Piers Ploughman* (1996) with what he sees the more courtly *Canterbury Tales* (1475). He seems to tackle the problem of the discontinuity between political and cultural history well in the excerpts that he made from F.C. Schlosser’s *History of the World* (1845). Literature helped Marx to lay hand on the analogies of numerous types. It is undoubtedly the allusions from *Henry IV* (1623), *Don Quixote* (1615) etc that lend a unique beauty to *Capital I* and bind his essays and pamphlets together. He also uses certain incidents from particular literary works which serve as model to show the absurdity in real life situations.

The term “Literature” and “Literary” occurs in *The Communist Manifesto* (1969). One of
the section titled as “Socialist and Communist Literature” opens as follows:

Owning to their historical position, it became the vocation of the aristocracies of France and England to write pamphlets against modern bourgeois society. In the French Revolution of July 1830, and in the French reform agitation, these aristocracies again succumbed to the hateful upstart. Thenceforth, a serious political struggle was altogether out of question. A literary battle alone remained possible. (Marx 127)

For Marx, the literature is not a detached and self-enclosed entity. But it is a broader reflection of the social and historical world in which the human mind is very much a concrete entity which is also a product of historical phenomena. Moreover, literature is not a useless by-product of artistic endeavor but it has a social function to perform that is to document the reality of bourgeois society.

The Communist Manifesto offers the readers enough insight where in they get to see that the writers perform effective function in the society. It asserts that the romantic illusions cannot act as a hurdle for the readers from looking at the atrocities committed to them. “The bourgeoisie has stripped of its halo every occupation hitherto honored and looked up with reverent awe. It has converted the physician, the lawyer, the priest, the poet, the man of science, into its paid-wage labourers” (Marx 111). It would not be an exaggeration to say that even poetry is reduced to a mere commodity in the modern world which is subject to the stern economic laws. Even poets are not spared by Marx in The Communist Manifesto, when he claims: “your [poet’s] very ideas are outgrowths of the conditions of your bourgeois production and bourgeois property” (Marx 477). So, it implies clearly that literature is the true and finest representation of the dialectical thought as it focuses on the social and political aspects of society. Literature is the exact replica of its times because according to the theory of determination by society, it could not be anything better or different. Marxism performs the tough job of demarcating materialist from the idealist parameters in literature by establishing a firm bond between the writer, writing and the social life.

Lionel Trilling (1905-1975) offers a unique view by appreciating the shackles imposed on the writers. According to him, the whole of a work “respond[s] within the iron limits of laws and necessities, that these are formidably and that the artist must use these formulations to achieve completeness of his response to the environment” (Trilling 88). In his assertion, “iron limits of law and necessities” is to be noticed. Trilling is trying to imply that the mode of production and Marx’s superstructure leave no option for the proletariat but he has to succumb to the stringent laws and norms which cannot be wished away but are to be acknowledged as hard core truth.

Terry Eagleton (1943- ) has projected in a negative light the the “means of literary production, distribution and exchange in a particular society—how books are published, the social composition of their authors and audience, levels of literary, the social determinants of “taste” (Eagleton 2). Eagleton is referring to the “taste” of a particular section of society to which a writer has to cater. Does catering to their taste give free flight to the imaginative faculty of writer is an important question to be answered. Marx seems to offer a plausible answer to this question by stating in Theory of Surplus Value (1859) that the modern bourgeois soil is not a favorable soil for art: capitalist production is inimical to certain kinds of intellectual production—to art and poetry. Marx is of this view that art outshoots all boundaries by constituting a realm of comparative freedom even in the unfavorable and unfriendly social atmosphere. But he is equally vigilant to the interplay between the intellectual production and mental production:

To study the connection between the intellectual and material production it is necessary, above all, to deal with the latter not as a general category but in a definite historical form. Thus, for example, the kind of intellectual production which corresponds to capitalist methods of production is different from that corresponding to medieval methods of production. If material production itself is not grasped in its specific historical form, it is impossible to understand the concrete nature of the intellectual production corresponding to it and the interaction of both the factors.

(Marx 15)

Considering this intricate relationship between literature and social struggle, Marxist critics do not anticipate of literary criticism as an abstract academic activity with abstract justification. They are very much sensitive to the assessment of artistic visions along with their practical relevance to the struggle envisioning the calm democratic forms of existence. As a result, Marxist criticism does not remain bound only to the evaluation of artistic works but broadens its horizon by incorporating art-criticism and art-creation. Their main purpose is to struggle for a democratization of the grand
The artist should be free from the firm clutches of the class in power, according to Marxism. In this regard Ngugi Wa Thiong’O says in his essay “Writers in politics: The power of words and the words of power”:

The class in power, for instance, controls not only the productive forces in the community but cultural development as well. The means of life, and how they are produced, exchanged and shared out, and the social institutions that the whole process gives rise to do move men, do profoundly affect the quality of their lives; how they eat, laugh, play woo and even make love. They constitute a universe of moral significance, of values and determine the quality of human life and are what imaginative literature is about…..Thus literature and politics are all about living humans, that is to say, actual men and women and children, breathing, eating, crying, laughing, creating, dying, growing, struggling, organizing, people in history on [Sic] which they are its products, its producers and its analysts...

(Thiong’O 476)

Marxists use the word “ideology” to tag the ruling ideas of the class in power which are certified as legitimate. They reinforce their hegemony which is unfortunately considered plausible in the hierarchical class structure of society. But Marxists shun this idea and propose the view that the hegemonic forces should stay at bay from the creative energy of artist as they block his intellectual production with their mean materialistic force. The ruling ideas are no less than the futile ideal expression of dominant material relationships and, therefore, they should not mess up the pristine literary ideas. In other words, power politics should never enjoy refuge in literary territory. The Marxist critics dream for an utopia where art and artists should be appreciated.

The bourgeoisie critics allege Marxist critics of devaluing art and literature but this allegation is baseless. A galaxy of critics like Houser, Caudwell, Plekhanov, Thomson and Fischer have in fact asserted the importance of art in the evolution of human culture. In The Necessity of Art (2010), Fischer talks about the bourgeoisie critics who fabricated the story about a variety of non-historical muses as the source of literature and art. By doing so, they have robbed literature or for that matter any artistic production of its vital function to liberate humanity from the quagmires of exploitation. Marx values literary aesthetics by owning a great deal of his works to the aesthetics of Goethe, Schiller, Herder, August, Hegel and William Schelegel. It is this love for literary aesthetics which makes him to assume about the need to tie the individual and the general, the specific and the symbolic together. He speaks about the “laws of beauty” in Das Capital which the artist observes. It is only the abiding of such aesthetic principles which makes a man to stand out from the beasts; as it is the sharp imaginative and creative faculty of an architect which distinguishes him from the most perfect bee or spider.

Marxism is very much conscious and speculative about the effects of class conflict on art and literature. Since, the proletariat and bourgeoisie always remain actively engaged in the working of society. This involvement of the two in a common enterprise causes a great deal of hostility in them. All this bears a direct effect on the means of productive forces which brings in a new system of production and distribution into being to meet their requirements. And, it is the development of these new forces of production which brings them into conflict with the relations of production, and these conflicts are reflected in class struggle. Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan have delineated the proper vision of class-struggle and its aftermaths in “Introduction: Starting with Zero Basic Marxism” in the following words:

Marxism is the theory of how the normality of our everyday world, with its quiet routines and rituals, its workaday habits and its working day, its monetary stresses and pressures on one end and its freedom and leisure on the other, is riven from within by what Marx called “class struggle”. The unity and continuity of everyday life is internally fissured by a contradiction or an antagonism that never gets talked about much but that overwhelmingly shapes who we are and what we are and what we can do in life. That contradiction between those with wealth and those without, between the means of making wealth and the inequitable division of control over them, keeps our society alive, but it also threatens to rip it apart at any moment.

(Julie and Ryan 231-232)

These conflicts form the kernel of the history which certainly leave an impression on literature. The alteration of the fundamental modes of
exchange and production are of utmost importance to allow everyone the chance to develop artistic and appreciative faculties which face a crises in the capitalist order of society.

To sum up, Marxism has created a revolutionary fervor by compelling the contemporary thinker to question his stand of helplessness and the reason of decay in modern world. Marxism faced an assault on it by deconstruction which attacked the idea of the existence of narrator or author and hence rejected the notion of centre in a text. Again, structuralism focussed on the strongly resistant structures in language, culture and society. However, the structuralist theory proved essentially deterministic in nature because it negated the value of human initiative. But quite contrary, Marxism breaks free from all the clutches by challenging the restraints imposed on the social environment through empowerment of the working masses. It would not be an exaggeration to say that Marxism emancipates a radical change as it has its roots both in past as well as in present and is conditioned to serve the present day crises. It’s focal point is history and, therefore, Marxism illuminates the process of history from the perspective of historical materialism. Hence, the urge to give a new and positive direction to the historical circumstances is basically the driving force of Marxism. The relationship between intellectual production and material economic consciousness has always been deliberated by the critics of Marxism. This relationship is perpetually mediated by the class interests, class struggle and obviously class psychology. In all this scenario, literature does not take a back seat but performs vital role by propagating consciousness among masses in particular the oppressed class who are engaged in the struggle to change the status quo.

References