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Marxism and Novel

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Abstract:

In this article, I want to elaborate how Marxism as philosophical and political project engages with literature in general and the genre of Novel in particular. Recently, Marx is accused of Eurocentric bias by postcolonial scholars. I want to discuss the validity of the claims of postcolonial scholars apropos Marxism in detail. Karl Marx (1818-1883) was the founding figure of a new intellectual tradition named Marxism and was recognized as one of the most influential philosopher and social theorists in the twentieth century. Etienne Balibar argues that the ideas elaborated by Marx have great contemporary relevance too.ⁱ

Keywords: Orientalism, Novel, Marxism, Modernism, Postcolonial theory.

Introduction

Good number of Marxists, including Karl Marx, wrote on literature. Marx himself was greatly interested in a wide range of literature like ancient Greek plays, Shakespeare's plays, French novels and others and extensively used themes and tropes from them in his philosophic and political works. Although he had not written any full-length treatise elaborating the principles of studying literature, he made very pertinent theoretical formulations on the connection between different art-forms and their context at different points in his writings. He argued,

It is recognized that where . . . the epic, for example . . . is concerned, certain significant creations within the compass of art are possible only at *an early stage of artistic development*. If this is the case with regard to different branches of art within the sphere of the arts, it is not so remarkable that this should also be the case with regard to *the whole artistic realm and its relation to the general development of the society*.ⁱⁱ

In the above quoted brief passage, Marx argued that epic as art form could only develop at the early stages of art. But, he did not explain why it was the case. But, from this hypothesis, he deduced a conclusion with a very remarkable speed. This was regarding the connection between the forms of art and the particular stage of the society. Here also, Marx's formulation was very intriguing and his understanding of art was guided by his historicist principles.

Latter Marxists more systematically developed Marxist conception of literature in a number of works. They included both the activists like Georg Lukacs, Leon Trotsky, Antonio Gramsci and academics like Fredric Jameson, Terry Eagleton. Marxists like Trotsky, Lukacs, and others have extensively and systematically worked on the connection between the emergence and flourishing of particular art forms and their respective socio-historical contexts. Lukacs is one of the most influential, prodigious, productive and original Marxist thinkers of the twentieth century. His area of interests encompasses literary criticism, philosophy and Marxism.

Lukacs's Conception of the Novel

Contemporary Marxist critic, Fredric Jameson characterizes Lukacs's contribution to the study of literature as "the most developed corpus of Marxist literary analysis in our own time."ⁱⁱⁱ Lukacs, in *Soul and Form*,^{iv} engages with ontological nature of literary forms in metaphysical terms. However, his most important and profoundly greatest work in the genre of literary criticism is *The Theory of the Novel*. This is recognized as one of the most philosophical and difficult books on the novel-form. Scholars point that the First World War had great impact on him in making his ideological and political choices. It is written on the verge of the First World War. While meditating on the winning prospects of the various sides in the war, he confesses,

The immediate motive for writing was supplied by the outbreak of the First World War and the effect which its acclamation by the social-democratic parties had upon the European left....the Central Powers would probably defeat Russia; this might lead to the downfall of Tsarism; I had no objection to that. There was also some probability that the West would defeat Germany; if this led to the downfall of the Hohenzollerns and the Hapsburgs, I was once again in favour. But then the question arose: who was to save us from *Western*



civilisation? (The prospect of final victory by the Germany of that time was to me nightmarish)^v

For present day readers this statement sounds quite intriguing and paradoxical. After the publication of *Orientalism*,^{vi} the idea of the West has become very contentious issue and received great attention from a number of scholars. Having been born in Hungary, why is Lukacs worried about ‘Western civilization’? What does it represent for him? Why is he deeply worried about that civilisation? What are the defining qualities of that civilisation? Are they different from that of the bourgeois? In Lukacs understanding, is Western equivalent to Bourgeois? A prominent Lukácsian scholar Richard Westerman^{vii} throws light on these crucial and pertinent questions. He writes,

I have always taken Lukács’s statement regarding “Western civilization” to refer to the *rationalized capitalist system*. When he says “the West,” he’s referring to Britain and the US above all (and partly France) - the nations fighting against the Central Powers - Germany and the Austro-Hungarian empires of the time. As a Hungarian, Lukács might have been expected to support the Central Powers - obviously he didn’t support them, because they were autocratic monarchies. He acknowledges that it would be good for those monarchies to be overthrown.^{viii}

As sub-title “A historic-philosophical essay on the forms of great epic literature” of the book suggests, Lukacs analyzes various forms of epic literature. He begins with the world of Greek epics and argues that the world of epic appears ‘like a home’ for its residents. This is a world of certainty and fixed forms without questions. He says that we are separated from the Greek world of epics by “the unbridgeable gulf.”^{ix} Further, he says that it is a “homogeneous world.”^x After having elaborated the nature of the world of the epic, he defines the novel in the following manner: “The novel is the epic of an age in which the extensive totality of life is no longer directly given, in which *the immanence of meaning in life has become a problem*, yet which still thinks in terms of totality.”^{xi}

In contrast to the world of epic, the world of novel is organized around “the problematic individual’s journeying towards himself.”^{xii} According to Lukacs, this feature of the novel makes it distinct genre from that of epic. This problematic individual encounters the world as an alien force. As a result, the tension emerges between them, which drives the

action and movement of the novel. For Lukacs, unlike drama and other genres consciousness of time is another unique feature of the Novel. The heroes of the epic do not experience the movement of time in a direct and existential manner. Lukacs encapsulates, "...time does not affect their inner changes; their age is assimilated in their characters, and Nestor is old just as Helen is beautiful or Agamemnon mighty."^{xiii} In contrast, the 'problematic individual' of the novel has to encounter the movement of time head on. The representation of 'real time' is the unique feature of the Novel as a genre.

Post-Colonial Marxism and Novel

Aijaz Ahmad is the most influential Marxist literary and cultural critic from the South Asia in contemporary times. His *In Theory* is recognized as one of the most significant and influential texts in recent times. At the very outset of this text, he enunciates his intention in the following manner: "This book is not offered as yet another contribution to literary theory as it is currently constituted, not as an extension of the discussions of colony and empire as they are at present conducted within branches of this theory."^{xiv} Among other things, *In Theory* interrogates the dominant ideological positions of post-colonial criticism and subjects them to damaging criticism. He argues that post-colonial criticism has dominated and eclipsed Marxist criticism in recent decades.

Post-colonial criticism started its career with the publication of *Orientalism*. Ahmad engages with this canonical and ubiquitous text at a great length and points to many methodological and ideological problems in it. One among them is that Said's highly eclectic method which draws on extremely divergent ideological sources to make his argument, which ultimately results in contradictory positions on the same issue. Said indiscriminately draws on both humanist scholar Erich Auerbach and anti-humanist Fredrich Nietzsche to make his argument. In the same manner, Ahmad finds it very problematic to group both revolutionary Marxist intellectual Gramsci and conservative intellectual Benda in the same class. He also criticizes Said for giving the discourse of Orientalism transhistorical proportions.

Said traces the genealogy of Marxian thought in Euro-centric episteme. Latter post-colonial thinkers like Aamir R. Mufti subscribes to the Said's position that Marx was an Orientalist thinker.^{xv} While commenting on Marx's writings on the impact of British rule on



India, Mufti argues that Marx could not overcome his Orientalist and Anglicist prejudices. Mufti argues:

But this struggle in Marx's India dispatches to get beyond the colonial debate does not always end in success. Some versions of the argument about Asiatic or Oriental "despotism" in fact represent an *amalgam* of Anglicist and Orientalist ideas in placing society in precolonial Asia outside the possibility of historical transformation:^{xvi}

Sudipta Kaviraj addresses the question of the problematic relation between postcolonial theory and Marx. Commenting on the most foundational figure of postcolonial theory, Kaviraj encapsulates, "Said himself gives us confusing signals, at times dismissing Marx as *a common Orientalist*, at others declaring his own methodological debt to two writers—Gramsci and Foucault—whose thinking bears a strong connection to Marxism, though in quite different ways."^{xvii} In a very innovative reading of Marx's work, Kaviraj demonstrates how Marx broke with Eurocentric tradition of thought. His article attempts to answer the following important questions: How did Marx make point of departure from Eurocentric thought in categorizing various cultures outside the West? And, what were the consequences of this point of departure? How far Marx was successful in overcoming Eurocentric notions of other societies outside Europe? If he was successful, what methodological path did he traverse? How did Marx overcome the Eurocentric bias that was so prevalent among great European thinkers like Hegel, J. S. Mill?

To answer above mentioned questions, Kaviraj explores the ways in which Marx expanded his conceptual apparatus to understand the nature of societies outside Europe and argues that Marx's methodological emphasis on historicity allowed him to analyze different social forms outside Europe in their particularity. For instance, Marx categorized pre-modern modes of production in Asia as, instead of calling it feudalism, Asiatic Mode of Production. However, many Indian Marxists absent-mindedly used categories that were originally coined to explain the European social realities to explain the social phenomena in Indian context. Many Indian Marxists used the category of feudalism to explain the pre-colonial structure of India. They essentially borrowed the category from their study of European feudalism. But, Indian Marxists like D. D. Kosambi made an attempt to explain the modes of production in pre-modern India by coining the categories like "feudalism from above" and "feudalism from

below.” Kosambi also criticizes Marx for assuming that village communities in India were in existence from immemorial times and demonstrates that they came into existence at a particular moment in a particular socio-historical context. Kaviraj argues that Marx might look like a common orientalist at certain points, but one could excavate the methodological moves in work that essentially move beyond the orientalist framework.

We have earlier seen that both Marx and Lukacs are deeply concerned with the problem of the connection between particular literary genres and specific socio-historical contexts. In the similar manner, Jameson makes the theoretical formulation regarding the connection between forms of the texts and socio-historical contexts. His oeuvre is devoted to interpret the connection between different kind of narratives and socio-historical contexts. He argues that while the texts, which are produced in the first world, become part of postmodern culture, all texts, which are produced in the third world, take the form of national allegories.^{xviii} This theoretical formulation has created debate among scholars.

Ahmad offers an elaborate critique of Jameson’s formulation and questions the rationality behind the division of the globe into three zones. He finds it particularly problematic to define third world in terms of “its experience of colonialism and imperialism.”^{xix} Jameson formulation does not take cognizance of the presence and mediation of capitalism in countries like India. Further, Ahmad characterizes the nature of capitalism in India as “a very miserable kind of capitalism”^{xx} as half of its population live in very degradable conditions. In contrast to Jameson, Ahmad argues that all of us live in single world and societies both in advanced capitalist countries like America and backward countries like India are constituted by “the division of classes.”^{xxi} Ahmad argues that Jameson’s formulation is unproductive as the production of literary texts is crucially determined by multiple factors.

Ahmad points to the cultural effects of the mediation of capitalism in India. It includes the division of public from private, individualization and the emergence of alienated subjects and others. He argues that texts produced for literary market reflect all these aspects to a certain extent. Further, these literary texts could be asked of same kind of questions as one would ask the literary texts produced in the advanced capitalist countries like England, America.



Ahmad addresses the immensely problematic nature of characterization of an author like Salman Rushdie as representative of the ‘Third World’ and his novels as representative texts of the ‘Third World.’ He elaborates the politics of canon formation of Euro-American academy and willing complicity of the intellectuals from recently de-colonized countries like India in the process. Ahmad situates Rushdie’s literary imagination in “contemporary (post)modernist literary imagination”^{xxii} and focuses on some very problematic aspects of *Shame*, written by him.

Ahmad criticizes the misogynistic representation of women in *Shame*, which has completely escaped the attention of other critics who have appreciated and characterized it as the representative text of the third world. In *Shame*, the representation of women either takes the form of idealization or misogyny. He points to the fact that there is no representation of people from oppressed strata and that most of the women characters in *Shame* are portrayed either as sexual maniacs or mentally unsound. Ahmad grounds this demeaning portrayal of woman and equating ruling class of a country with the country itself in “the general structure of Rushdie’s *imaginative sympathies*.”^{xxiii}

Ahmad points to the fact that the demeaning portrayal of women is quite prevalent in the modernist writing. For this, he gives the example of famous modernist poet, T. S. Eliot and argues that Rushdie draws his narrative techniques both from Indian epics and European modernist texts. Rushdie’s ubiquitous emphasis on “third world” nations like India and Pakistan in his novels, Ahmad argues, what has resulted in is the “obscuring of his ideological moorings in the High Culture of the modern metropolitan bourgeoisie as well as the suppression of a whole range of questions which have little to do with the ‘the Nation’ or ‘the Third World’ ...”^{xxiv}

I want to point out some highly problematic positions of Aijaz Ahmad. While commenting on the politics of procedures of canon-formation of Third-World Literature and the dominance of English in post-colonial India, he writes “Really productive kinds of bilinguality are *probably* on the decline, and English is now in the process of emerging as a major language for fiction-writing by the *greatly talented*.”^{xxv} I contend that this is the most jaw-dropping position one could take on this issue. Of course, there is ambiguity in Ahmad’s articulation of his position. Contrary to Ahmad’s observation, many Telugu intellectuals and creative writers are bilingual. As Indian languages have witnessed some of the greatest writers like Ravi Sastri, Mahasweta Devi in post-colonial India, it is risible to assume that

“greatly talented” are choosing to write in English. I argue that this is very problematic, unverified and biased position on this issue on various levels. It implies that less-talented people choose to write in other Indian languages.

ⁱ Balibar, Etienne makes this argument in his *The Philosophy of Marx*.

ⁱⁱ Quoted in Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, p. 464. (emphasis added)

ⁱⁱⁱ Jameson, Fredric. *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act*, p. 91.

^{iv} Lukacs, Georg. *Soul and Form*.

^v Lukacs, Georg. *The Theory of the Novel: A Historico-Philosophical Essay on the Forms of Great Epic Literature*, p. 11. (emphasis added)

^{vi} *Orientalism* is a very influential and ubiquitous text which defies disciplinary boundaries. Its author is Edward W. Said and is published in 1978.

^{vii} His recent work on the philosophy of Georg Lukacs is *Lukacs's Phenomenology of Capitalism: Reification Revalued*.

^{viii} Personal communication. (emphasis added)

^{ix} Lukacs, Georg. *The Theory of the Novel: A Historico-Philosophical Essay on the Forms of Great Epic Literature*, p. 31.

^x *Ibid*, p.32.

^{xi} *Ibid*, p. 56

^{xii} *Ibid*, p. 80.

^{xiii} *Ibid*, p.121.

^{xiv} Ahmad, Aijaz. *In Theory: Classes, Nations, Literatures*, p. 7.

^{xv} See Mufti, Aamir R. *Forget English! Orientalism and World Literatures*.

^{xvi} *Ibid*, p. 86. (emphasis in original)

^{xvii} Kaviraj, Sudipta. “Marx and Postcolonial Thinking,” p. 3.

^{xviii} Jameson, Fredric makes this argument in his article “Third-World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism.”

^{xix} Ahmad, Aijaz. *In Theory: Classes, Nations, Literatures*, p. 98.

^{xx} *Ibid*, p. 100.

^{xxi} *Ibid*, p. 103.

^{xxii} *Ibid*, p. 128.

^{xxiii} *Ibid*, p. 152. (emphasis added)

^{xxiv} *Ibid*, p. 127.

^{xxv} *Ibid*, p. 73. (emphasis added)



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