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**MARXIST CRITICISM**

According to Jack Richardson, it is an approach to literature that focus on the ideological content of a work- its explicit and implicit assumptions and values about matters such as culture, race, class, and power. Marxist criticism, based largely on the writings of Karl Marx, typically aims at not only revealing and clarifying ideological issues but also correcting social injustices. Some Marxist critics use literature to describe the competing socio-economic interests that too often advance capital interests such as money and power rather than social interests such as morality and justice. They argue that, literature and literary criticism are essentially political because they either challenge or support economic oppression. Because of this emphasis on the political aspects of texts, Marxist criticism focuses more on the content and themes of literature than on its form. This criticism is based on the social and economic theories of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels. Their beliefs include the following:

Value is based on labour, and the working class will eventually overthrow the capitalist middle class. In the meantime, the middle class exploits the working class. Most institutions—religious, legal, educational, and governmental—are corrupted by middle-class capitalists. Marxist critics apply these economic and social theories to literature by analysing first, ideologies that support the elite and place the working class at a disadvantage, and secondly, class conflict. Marxist criticism is often interested in unravelling how a literary work reflects (intentionally or not) the socio-economic conditions of the time in which it was written and/or the time in which it is set, and those conditions that reveal about the history of class struggle. According to Kelly Griffith (2002), fully developed Marxist criticism appeared early in the 20th century, especially in the 1930s during the Great Depression. This "socialist" criticism applauded literature that depicted the difficulties of the poor and downtrodden, especially when they struggled against oppressive capitalist bosses. Examples of literature with such strong "proletarian" elements are works by Emile Zola, Maxim Gorky, Charles Dickens, Richard Wright, John Steinbeck, Theodore Dreiser, Ngugi wa Thiongo and Femi Osofisan. Early Marxist critics approved of a socialist solution to the problems of the oppressed and judged the quality of works on the basis of their Marxist orientation. The strong “proletarian” elements in the works of African writers like Ngugi assume combative dimensions in the late 1970s and 1980s with street theatre enactments of Marxist- oriented plays that shook the establishment earning him the tag of “literary guerilla of the masses” in his country, Kenya.

Beginning from World War II, however, a new generation of critics infused Marxist criticism with renewed vigour. A good example is the Hungarian critic Georg Lukacs, who argues that literature should reflect the real world. By this, Lukacs does not mean that literature should be a mirror image of society by, for example, giving detailed descriptions of its physical contents or its patterns of behaviour. Rather, literature should represent the economic tensions in society as described in Marx's writings. Ironically, for Lukacs, works that accurately represent the real world may be less "real" than works that emphasise themes (ideas) over description. Lukacs believes that literature might even have to distort reality to represent the "truth" about society. To show the economic struggles caused by capitalism, for example, an author might have to create character types one would never meet in real life.

As mentioned earlier, Marxist criticism evolved from the philosophies of Karl Marx (1818-1883) and Friedrich Engels. Marxism views a literary text as the product of an ideology particular to a specific historical period, not the product of an individual consciousness. The text, for Marxist critics, is judged based on its portrayal of social actions. They insist that literature must be understood in relation to historical and social reality. The central Marxist position is that the economic base of a society determines the nature and structure of the ideology, institutions, and practices, including literature, that form the superstructure of that society. In Lukacs’ book, *The Historical Novel,* he argues that literature must evoke a revolutionary consciousness in the common people. In his view, a good artist is one who can effectively represent the totality of human life. The most effective mode for this representation is literary realism, which for Lukacs reflects reality in the Marxist sense. Lukacs sees realism as the only literary mode capable of representing the totality of society by revealing through its narrative form the underlying. Movement of history. Marxism situates literature in its historical contexts and in its socio-economic development. Marxism describes history as the history of the conflict between classes. Foremost Marxist critics, such as Christopher Claudwell, Georg Lukacs, and Walter Benjamin, see literature as refracting socio-economic reality.

Importantly too, Antonio Gramsci (1891-1937) is also revered as one of the key contributors to the Marxist tradition in the 20th century, along with thinkers such as Louis Althusser and Vladimir Lenin. His contribution entailed a revision of predominant interpretations of Marx’s writings during his time to address the flurry of criticisms levelled at Marxist theory (both from within and outside the Marxist tradition). More specifically, Gramsci’s ideas can be described as political and revolutionary. He sought to formulate a variant of Marxism that would make sense of existing power relations and the political currents within Italian society; at the same time, he advocated a distinct (and extensive) course of action for his country’s socialist movements. Two main trends could be identified in Gramsci’s postulations. Firstly, Gramsci fundamentally rejects interpretations of Marx which trade on a crude materialism (and economism)-to this end, he accords a greater role to the “superstructure” and emphasises the importance of culture, civil society, political practice, and social action. Secondly, Gramsci consistently resists mechanistic (or deterministic) readings of Marx’s theory of history, instead, he stresses the logic of contingency in place of logic of necessity with regards to social change-this is evidenced in his prescriptions for political (and revolutionary) practice.

In fact, Gramsci sought to develop a coherent account to explicate and explain a structure-superstructure dialectic, departing from the dominant underpinnings of materialism and “economism” present in accounts of classical Marxism. It is evident that he could not envision a simple one-way causal relationship which proceeded directly from structure to superstructure. In line with questioning crudely materialist accounts of Marxism, Gramsci was also clearly interested in emphasising the role of ideas and social practice.

**CONTRIBUTIONS OF KARL MARX TO MARXIST CRITICISM**

As we noted earlier, Marxist criticism evolves from the philosophies of Karl Marx (1818-1883) and Friedrich Engels. Marx made several important statements on the nature of human society one of which is that consciousness determines life. A change in material conditions does lead to changes in the way humans think. He was also persuaded that the economic system is the most fundamental aspect of any society. Other aspects of society, culture, literature, politics, and religion, are parts of a "superstructure" whose characteristics are, at least, to some extent dependent on the nature of the base. Marx's Philosophy though focusing on history, philosophy, and economics, has proved to be of special interest to critics of literature and culture.

The concepts of "alienation" and "commodification" have proved useful to Marxist critics of literature. With division of labour in society, a separation occurs between individuals who become distanced from each other because of their different skills and engagements. Individuals also become estranged from society because they participate only in small portions of what is going on in society. As far as Marx is concerned, a "commodity" is an article produced not for use but for sale. A "commodity" is valued not for its use but for its price. The individual may become emotionally attached to the commodity in a way that causes his estrangement from material reality. The individual is alienated from the fruit of his labour. Marx regards literature as a form of ideology just like the parliament, judiciary, education, religion, philosophy, politics, and law which can be used for the needs of the capitalists or the proletariat. Necessarily, literature, the Marxists contend, reflects the reality outside it. This is quite the opposite of what the formalists believe. The message is more important in Marxist criticism than the form or the device. Almost all leading Marxists, like Lenin, have made significant pronouncements on literature and society. Lenin, for instance, calls for an openly class-partisan literature. He argues that neutrality in writing is impossible; rather literature should be linked with the working-class movement.

Discuss why the message is more important than the form or the device in Marxist criticism in the light of “commodification.”

**THE FUNDAMENTAL PREMISES OF MARXIST CRITICISM**

The function of Marxist literary criticism is to expose how works of literature represent dominant ideologies. Some Marxist critics, like Louis Althusser, believe that literature helps readers see the contradictions and fault lines in ideology. Others, like Terry Eagleton, hold that literature furthers ideology by making it seem attractive and "natural." Eagleton's work, *Marxism and Literary Criticism* (1976), provides an overview of recent Marxist criticism, while his *Literary Theory: An Introduction* (1983) surveys modern critical theory from a Marxist point of view. In *Marxism and Literary Criticism,* Eagleton rightly defines Marxist criticism as “part of a larger body of theoretical analysis which aims to understand ideologies – the ideas, values and feelings by which men experience their societies at various times. And certain of those ideas, values and feelings are available to us only in literature”. He finally summarises its value, maintaining that “to understand ideologies is to understand both the past and the present more deeply; and such understanding contributes to our liberation”.

For Marxist critics, politics and economics cannot be separated from art. Marxists hold that any theory which treats literature in isolation as pure aesthetics or the product of a writer's ingenuity, divorcing it from society and history, will be seriously deficient in its ability to explain what literature really is. For Marxist critics, social background is important in the consideration of any work.

Furthermore, Marxists see history as a series of struggles between antagonistic social classes and the type of economic production they engage in. The structure of history and the structure of society are referred to as *dialectical*- the dynamic and opposed forces at work within them. Dialectic refers to a method by which history and society can be analysed to reveal the true relationship between their component parts.

Marxism has very many different approaches. A critic might, for instance, start by looking at the structure of history and society to see how literature reflects or distorts this structure. He could also start from a general concept of literature and then move to writers and texts and out to society. He could also start from a specific text and move to the author, the author's class, and the role of this class in society. In Marxist thinking, the socio-economic element in any society is the ultimate determinant of that society's character. Basic economic structure engenders several social institutions and beliefs which act to regulate or dissipate the conflict and keep the mode of production in order. Literature is one of the things situated in the base or superstructure of society. This means that literature is a social element that can be used either to keep the capitalist mode of economy and lifestyle in place or to expose and attack it.

Marxism has also given rise to the doctrine of socialist realism which sees literature as social criticism and analysis. The artist is a social activist. The writer, according to Marxist critics, translates social facts into literary facts, and the critic's duty is to decode the facts and uncover its reality. It is the writer's duty to provide a truthful, historico-concrete portrayal of reality. This makes the notion of reflection of reality a deep-seated tendency in Marxist criticism. It is a way of combating formalist theory which locks the literary work within its own sealed world, divorced from history and social reality. The Marxist writer is a socially or ideologically committed writer. In Marxist criticism, there is no room for *‘arts for art's sake'*. The writer must be interested in his own time and be socially responsible.

**CRITICISMS AGAINST MARXIST CRITICISM**

As you have learnt so far, Karl Marx saw a capitalist society as basically a class society where the oppression of a class by another is perpetrated. He was an avowed adversary of oppression in whatever form and joined the proletariat (working class) to advocate for the abolition of class oppression. You also learnt that the philosophy of Marxism is rooted in what is known as dialectical materialism, which stresses economic determinism (economic survival) as an index of social struggles. Marxist ideologues believe that all social struggles are economy-based whose resolution stirs conflicts among the different classes inhabiting a social milieu. For the Marxists, human society is divided into two broad classes: the oppressor and the oppressed (in Marx’ parlance the bourgeoisie and the proletariat). By holding the means of production, the bourgeoisie becomes dominant thereby oppressing the latter.

One of the allegations levelled against Marxism is that by the fact that the Communist Bloc in Europe has failed, it is a proof that Marxism is not a viable theory. Again, the overthrow of the upper class by the peasants, as advocated by Marxism, remains a mirage in reality.

Despite its shortcomings, Marxist theory still provides us a meaningful way to understand history and current events.

According to Lois Tyson (2006), literature, for Marxist critics, does not exist in some timeless, aesthetic realm as an object to be passively contemplated. Rather, like all cultural manifestations, it is a product of the socio-economic and hence ideological conditions of the time and place in which it was written, whether or not the author intended it to be so. Because human beings are themselves products of their socio-economic and ideological environment, it is assumed that authors cannot help but create works that embody ideology in some form. For Marxists, the fact that literature grows out of and reflects real material/historical conditions creates at least two possibilities of interest to Marxist critics:

(1) The literary work might tend to reinforce in the reader the ideologies it embodies, or

(2) It might invite the reader to criticise the ideologies it represents. Many texts do both. And it is not merely the *content* of a literary work—the “action” or the theme—that carries ideology, but the *form* as most Marxists would argue. They contend that if content is the “what” of literature, then form is the “how”. Realism, for example, gives us characters and plot as if we were looking through a window onto an actual scene taking place before our eyes. Our attention is drawn not to the nature of the words on the page but to the action those words convey. For some Marxists, realism is the best form for Marxist purposes because it clearly and accurately represents the real world, with all its socio-economic inequities and ideological contradictions. It also encourages readers to see the unhappy truths about material/historical reality, for whether authors intend it they are bound to represent socio-economic inequities and ideological contradictions if they accurately represent the real world.

Marxist criticism is fundamentally anchored on the work of Karl Marx. It is a dominant critical theory propounded in the middle of the 19th century and flourished tremendously throughout the 20th century. It is concerned with historical and cultural issues. Marxism identifies social and economic factors as crucial denominators of relationship in society. Karl Marx saw a capitalist society as basically a class society where the oppression of a class by another is perpetrated. He was an avowed adversary of oppression in whatever form. Thus, he joined the proletariat (working class) to advocate for the abolition of class oppression. The philosophy of Marxism is rooted in what is known as dialectical materialism, which stresses economic determinism (economic survival) as an index of social struggles. The Marxist ideologues believe that all social struggles are economy-based whose resolution stirs conflicts among the different classes inhabiting a social milieu. Society is divided into two broad classes; the oppressor and the oppressed, who in Marxist parlance are the bourgeoisie and the proletariat respectively. Because the former holds the means of production, it becomes dominant and hence oppresses the latter.

It is the duty of Marxist writers to expose the oppressors’ class and its mechanism of oppression. This is the reason Marxist critics see the history of society as the history of class struggles and also explain the class struggles and antagonism predominant in a capitalist society. The interest of Marxist literature is to defend the course of the oppressed. The Marxist critics believe that the achievement of this goal is by evolving an egalitarian society where the ideal is stressed. To achieve this, they explore society and situate sources of oppression. They identify and critique elements of exploitation, alienation, and other indices of oppression.