

## Introducing Marxist Literary Criticism

Anand B. Kulkarni\*  
Professor & Head, PG Dept. of English  
Gramonnati Mandal's Arts, Commerce & Science College  
Narayangaon, Pune  
(Affiliated to Savitribai Phule Pune University)

### ABSTRACT

Marxism as an ideology and mode of practice continues to exist in the twenty first century. It is not as orthodox and dogmatic as it used to be in the mid twentieth century. It has absorbed and reformulated many contemporary critical trends like post-Marxism and has reappeared in different theoretical garbs. Marxist literary criticism is by no means a bygone critical mode; it is very much in practice and has taken on different forms of enquiry like post-colonialism and cultural studies. Given the all-pervasive nature and presence of Marxist literary criticism in academic and research world and its usefulness in exploring hidden aspects of texts, it is significant to know its basics and recent developments in its pursuits. As long as people are still thinking dialectically, they are still disagreeing with each other, and as long as people are still disagreeing with philosophers, Marxist literary criticism will be important. Marxism, in particular, had several modifications. It is important to note that someone who really believes in and supports Marxist political theory ought to put it into reality. The present paper tries to briefly sketch its basic assumptions and its mode of enquiry. Researchers and students need to get their ideas and views about Marxist literary criticism clear so that they can apply its tenets to texts for insightful understanding.

**Keywords:** *Love, Woman, Farmers, Art, The Music of Nature, Childhood, The Dying Earth, Human Life.*

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\* Author: Anand B. Kulkarni

Email: [andabk121@gmail.com](mailto:andabk121@gmail.com)

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## Introduction

It is almost mandatory for students of literary criticism and theory to acquaint themselves with Marxist criticism for the obvious reason that it influenced major critical movements in 20th century in some or the other way. Therefore, it would be appropriate to make a detailed investigation of this school in order to form a sound base for understanding theories that emerged in the modern and postmodern periods. Marxism and Marxist Literary Criticism are two separate but interrelated concepts. Marxism is a theoretical amalgamation of different concepts put together by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels. It is a critique of capitalism. Marxism is a political as well as economic theory and there is very little literature in it. It did not arrive as a theoretical approach for literary analysis. After Marx, thinkers and scholars derived and devised some concepts from Marxism.

These concepts helped to understand the relationship between society and literature as well as the role of literature in shaping certain values and social practices. This is where the Marxist Literary Criticism was born. As per Terry Eagleton's assessment, Marx did not propose any separate theory about literature or about criticism as well. Marx did not talk in detail about literature or his appreciation of it. However, he considered art and literature seriously. He was a voracious reader and a lover of literature and poetry as well. Naturally, he had his views about poetry and literature, but later Marxist critics derived certain principles, certain ideas from Marxism and built a theory, which came to be known as Marxist Literary Theory or Marxist Criticism. The reasons behind the birth of Marxist literary criticism were very social, political, cultural, and historical.

Marxism originally developed in the 19th century as a pragmatic view of history. Based on the ideas of Karl Marx (1818–1883) and Friedrich Engels (1820-1895), Marxism provides both a philosophical system (theory) and a plan of action to bring social change (praxis). Marx and Engels both criticized the wealthy class and their domination of the poor class. Apart from opposing Capitalism, Marxism produced the economic interpretation of history. In all, economics, history, society, politics, and culture are major areas in which both Marx and Engels worked and came out with an extremely revolutionary and highly influential theory called Marxism. It is a social and political theory accompanied by economic ideas. 'Social' because it is concerned with the capitalist form of society and 'political' as it refers to power

relation within capitalist society, and also demands some action. Marxism explains the social, economic, political, and cultural understanding of reality, society, and the individual. However, it hardly refers to literature per se. Marxism has its origin in the views expressed in the three seminal texts, *The German Ideology* (1845) and *The Communist Manifesto* (1848) jointly written by Marx and Engels and Marx's *The Das Capital* (1867). German philosopher, Georg Hegel in 19th century revised this term of dialectic. For him, dialectic refers to a process, whereby a proposition or statement (thesis) is followed by a counter- statement (anti-thesis) and both contribute in developing a new idea, i.e. synthesis. Marxism built on this Hegel's notion to indicate a social process whereby a conflicting interest of classes led to war and finally a new system or synthesis is established. Marx and Engels also point out that our ideas and thinking is influenced and shaped by our day today activities and language of real life. Thus, an individual's consciousness is not shaped by any spiritual influence but by daily life and interactions with other human beings.

### **Major Marxist critical ideas**

**Critique of capitalism:** Capitalism stands for a mode of production, in which capital in its different forms like money, resources, purchasing power, stocks of good etc. is fundamental for production. Capitalism creates two classes in society- the wealthy class or the bourgeoisie and labor class or the proletariat. The wealthy class owns all means of production and property, whereas the labor class actually works for producing goods and services. However, Marx and Engels also claim that in market-based economy, the process of production, distribution, and consumption of goods is very complex. Every individual and every group develop different interests, which clash with each other. These clashes among economic forces ultimately bring radical change in the economic structure of society, taking it towards a new order.

**Base and Superstructure:** Marxism uses the metaphor from architecture to explain the relation between economic force and social consciousness. Base refers to the economic means of production and superstructure includes institutions (social, legal, religious), system (political, education, medical, cultural), and forms of expressions (art, literature, media). In other and simpler terms, Base is the economic situation or conditions, and Superstructure is derivative or product of the economic conditions. According to Marxist view, (economic) base generates as well as controls all human institutions and ideologies. In other words, Marx and Engels believed that every discourse in the world is the product of economic conditions. Thus, literature and art are not free from the economic conditions from which they have emerged.

Therefore, if one wants to understand literature, one should turn towards the understanding of economic conditions.

**Ideology:** In Marxist analysis, ideology is a very famous and complex term. As Raymond Williams puts it, “the initial bearings of the concept of ideology are then very complex. It was indeed an assertion against metaphysics that there are ‘no ideas in the world, but those of men’. At the same time, intended as a branch of empirical science, ideology was limited, by its philosophical assumptions to a version of ideas as ‘transformed sensations’” (56: 1985). It refers to the intricate relationship between social groups when they engage in the production of goods. The social class with economic power has social and political control as well. This class creates dominance by using ideology. Marx used the term in negative sense to denote ideas, customs, values, and practices of ruling class. Ideology is more concerned with worldview.

### **Form and Content**

The discussions on form and content have necessarily been about the supremacy of one over the other. The non-Marxist critical approaches like New Criticism consider Form to be more important whereas the Marxist approach considers content to be more important. There is an oppositional relation between form and content, where the form is structure and the content is substance or the subject matter. For Marxist critics, content is more important as it is related to society, politics, culture, and many other important discourses. According to Marxist Literary Criticism, literature is not autonomous or closed. It is related to the realities around it, and hence, content is important. Form and content have triggered numerous debates in Marxist literary criticism. For example, the Frankfurt critics believe that the relation between form and content is complex and experimenting with form is an attempt to counter ideologies.

### **Trajectory of Marxist literary criticism**

Marxist criticism became influential and later on popular because of the contexts, which were prevalent in those days in Europe and America. The New Critics focused specifically on the textual study of literature and context was being sidelined so critics wanted to bring the context back into the study of literature. Influence of Marx and Engel’s theories on many thinkers and writers can be seen in two distinct phases- the Russian Marxism and the Western Marxism. The first phase is shaped by the theorist like Georgii Plekhonov (1856–1918) and Karl Kautsky (1854–1938) as well as by political activist like Vladimir Lenin (1870-1924) and Leon Trotsky (1879-1940). Plekhonov translated The Communist Manifesto in Russia and also wrote books

like *Fundamental Problems of Marxism* (1908), and *Art and Social Life* (1912). He strongly believed that Marx's idea of economic determinism. According to his arguments, every creative person who influences society is a product of social relations. Literary writers can serve society when they blend social concerns with artistic expressions. Kautsky was against any improvement or revision of Marxism. Both of them formulated an orthodox version of Marxism. Before initiating the Russian Revolution, Lenin published *Party Organization and Party Literature* (1905), where he states the interlinking of working-class movement and literature. Of course, after 1917 Revolution, Lenin changed his stand on literature and reformulated it in align with his part policies. Trotsky, soon after the revolution wrote *Literature and Revolution* (1924), stating that the content of literary work should not necessarily be revolutionary. He believed that asking writers to stand against capitalism or party industrial setup is absurd. The political leadership should protect art and not dominate it. Trotsky, owing to his broader literary perspective, is considered to be the founder of Marxist literary criticism. Joseph Stalin, the dictator of Russia was not as broad-minded as Lenin or Trotsky in his approach towards literature and only approved 'politically correct' texts for publication and distribution.

The first major branch of the Western Marxism was developed by a Hungarian critic, Georg Lukacs (1885-1971). Borrowing Russian Formalist techniques, Lukacs analysed literary symbols, images and literary devices in order to expose class conflicts and direct relationship between base and superstructure. He considered Sir Walter Scott, Honore de Balzac and Leo Tolstoy as the greatest writers because they effectively depicted reality. He disapproved modernist writers like Emile Zola, James Joyce, Virginia Woolf by calling their writing as false and Modernism as a bourgeois ideology. Lukacs criticised any attempt to separate history and society from literature. His approach of literary analysis emphasizes that a text is a direct reflection of social consciousness and hence, known as reflection theory. It aims to show the negative effects of capitalism like alienation and fragmentation. These reflectionist critics endorse the view that believes in a one-way relationship between base and superstructure. This is view, at present, is infamously known as vulgar Marxism. They believe they can reflect the textual reality and the author's worldview (or *weltanschauung*) by using the close reading technique.

The Frankfurt School was a German group of critics that made a serious attempt to develop western mode of Marxism. Major critics of this school include, Walter Benjamin (1892-1940)

Max Horkheimer (1895-1973), Herbert Marcuse (1898-1979), Theodor Adorno (1903-1969), Lucien Goldmann (1913-1970) and even Jean-Paul Sartre. The Frankfurt critics criticized capitalism as well as Russian Marxism for being oppressive. They also supported the view that literature reveals a alienation and fragmentation within society. They argue that a text is just like any other commodity that is produced by capitalism. The market forces ultimately decide publication, circulation of Therefore, no pure aesthetic activity can exist in this situation. Critics like Walter Benjamin considered fragmentation within a text as useful for promoting socialist ideals. They approached literature without any quasi-religious aura and resisted the bourgeois ideology embedded within a text. Bertolt Brecht (1898-1956), a German dramatist, experimented with this new way of thinking directly and applied it to the theater. According to Brecht, dramatists use the theater to express their ideas, but the theater actually controls them. In his epic theater, Brecht abandoned the assumption that the audience should be made to believe that what they are witnessing is real. Brecht rather attempted to create the ‘alienation effect.’ Dialogues in his plays are frequently interrupted with a song or speech, which makes a direct appeal to the audience and keep them aware about the moral and social issues. Brecht was successful in exposing the bourgeois ideology that was enrooted in arts. Theodor Adorno deserves a special attention for his views on relations between art and society. His 1970 book *Aesthetic Theory* elaborates his interdisciplinary thinking and establishes him as a leading critic of the first generation of Critical Theory. Adorno’s theory brings together the modern art movement and the philosophical views on aesthetics by thinker like Kant and Hegel. He specifically focuses on the social character of art, by combining Kant’s emphasis on art form, Hegel’s thrust on intellectual aspect of art and Marx’s concern about dependence of art on society.

The Western Marxism has manifested in two more versions- the Structuralist version and the Gramscian version. The Structuralist version, inspired by Saussure’s ideas, believes that there can never be an absolute division between reality and its representation in literature. Followers of this view like Louis Althusser or Pierre Macherey were more concerned about the process behind the production of a work of art. For these critics, a literary work is a part of general social system and a reality in itself. The Gramscian version, on the other side is inspired by Antonio Gramsci’s concept of hegemony. It refers to process whereby dominant class maintains its total control. Literature is considered as a historical institution and class function of intellectuals play decisive in building literature. Raymond Williams and Terry Eagleton are

major figures from this mode of Marxism. The above discussion makes it clear that Marxist criticism is not a single unified critical approach. It is a pool of various methods of literary analysis.

As mentioned earlier, alongside Lukacs there are at least three to four critics, who tried to set traditional Marxism in the new framework in Europe in the early 20th century. Italian critic, Antonio Gramsci (1891–1937) is one of the trendsetters in this sense. Lukacs and his followers claimed that the literary superstructure reflects the economic base, whereas Gramsci believes in a complex relationship between the base and the superstructure. He was more interested in knowing how the bourgeoisie class controls and maintains its dominance over the working class. At this point, he proposed the concept of hegemony. Hegemony, for Gramsci, is a strategy that uses assumptions, values, and meanings that shape meaning and define reality for the majority of people in a given society. It is a clever blending of force (generated by the bourgeoisie class), consent (tactfully fabricated from the intellectual people), and power (coercion). There is Force, which is multiplied by Consent and gets converted into Coercion. That is Hegemony. In simple terms, political force in the hands of the ruling class bring out the consent of the intellectuals and the consent of the masses and imposes certain rules, regulations, ideas over the society through which it tries to earn the benefits or ensure its rule. Gramsci argues that by using hegemonic strategies the bourgeoisie actually, control the economic base and also superstructure including music, literature, art. Gramsci's analysis influenced many critics like Raymond Williams and Terry Eagleton, and also provided theoretical foundation to critical movements like postcolonialism, subaltern studies and cultural studies. If Gramsci is responsible for bringing dynamics of hegemony in Marxism, then Louis Althusser (1918-1990) must be credited for reinterpretation the concept of ideology. Althusser, a French Marxist theorist, starts with a question of why anyone should write and study literature. Like his mentor, Gramsci, Althusser refutes the Lukacs sponsored reflection theory: He replied with his mode of analysis, known as production theory. His theory claims that literature should not be denounced as superstructure. His notable works *For Marx* (1965) and *Reading* (1970), puts forward the dialectical relationship between the superstructure and the base. Elements in superstructure, including Art do affect the superstructure. Art in this sense is responsible for initiating revolution. The same applies for literary texts, which work as vehicles of ruling ideologies heralding values and beliefs helpful to the ruling class. Literature, according to Althusser works in a very subtle way to create and consolidate the tastes and habits of people.



Terry Eagleton is a leading Marxist critic, cultural theorist of Britain, and a student of Raymond Williams. His writing exhibits variety and interdisciplinary concerns, covering issues like ideology and literature, ideology in the works of English novelists, the function of criticism, and the reassessment of structuralist and poststructuralist theories from the Marxist point of view. Eagleton's early critical acumen had the structuralist influences. His *Criticism and Ideology* (1976) states that criticism should make an attempt to be scientific by rejecting the individuality that rises from ideological positions. In the second phase, Eagleton has been influenced by the poststructuralist theories and thinking of Walter Benjamin and Bertolt Brecht. His works like *Marxism and Literary Criticism* (1976), *Literary Theory: An Introduction* (2008) and *On Evil* (2010) contain his critical positions. Eagleton has mostly followed the Marxist historical materialistic method of analysis. Eagleton relates the activity of literary criticism with cultural and political issues and expects an active role in bringing about radical social change. His views on interrelationship between literature and history are seminal in many ways. His views contain implicit reaction against claims of textual autonomy and objectivity made by critical schools like New Criticism. He asserts that literature is neither a product of pure inspiration nor the product of individual emotions. Literature, according to him, is a product of ideology, which in itself is a product of history. In this sense, history is very much involved in the production of literary texts. Ideology, as perceived by Eagleton, is an outcome of social interactions between people, which is set in specific historical context, i.e. definite time and place. The fundamental task of criticism, therefore, is to recreate the writers' ideology as well as the overall setup that developed particular ideology.

Marxism has never been a static or fixed critical approach. There have been different versions and there have been successive phases of Marxism where recent Marxist critics have turned away from economic determinants towards other determinants. To quote a few: cultural, social, historical, racial, gender-based forces have played important role in formulating different versions of Marxist theory. However, it is notable that all these forces have their basis in economic conditions. However, the economic conditions have not enjoyed the same intensity or the same depth they used to do in the traditional orthodox Marxist Criticism. The next crucial feature of Marxist Literary criticism is about its materialistic and social orientation. It discusses primarily the relation of literature and society and this relation is multivalent, multiple because literature and society are related in different ways and Marxist criticism tries to explore the ways of interconnectivity between literature and society. Marxist literary criticism undertakes



an ideological study of literature. It considers literature as the direct expression of class interests and analyses literary texts to uncover ideological currents. Such study is carried out by exhibiting how certain ideas and values are structurally imposed through a literary work on its readers. It also explains how the dominant class ideologically constructs certain literary forms. At another level, the ideology study manifests the working of publishing and distribution as ideological apparatus. These are the subtle operations that decide which books to be published, which books to be displayed in bookstores as bestsellers and also which books and authors to be endorsed with prizes and publicity. In Marxist literary criticism, the concept of realism has been central in all its versions. Realism refers to the authentic presentation of society and especially class conflicts in it. This is done through the use of particular subjects and typical characters. However, this concept of realism, regarded by earlier Marxist critics like Lukacs, has been challenged by later critics like Brecht, Adorno, Benjamin and Macherey. For Brecht it is important that literature expresses radical and revolutionary content rather than present an accurate portrait of society. For other Marxist critics, so-called realistic literature cannot express true contradictions in society. On the contrary, it hides them and projects false unity in its reflection of the world. Marxist literary criticism explores struggles at different levels within a literary text. Marxism as a philosophy believes that every society progresses through the conflicts between two or more contradictory forces. This struggle is responsible for the social transformation. Literary texts, for Marxist critics, are fertile sites of such struggle. Some literary forms, like tragedy or epic, are based on the struggle and victory principles. Hence, Marxist literary criticism takes up literary analysis from this perspective to ultimately show the progression of human civilization. Marxism and Marxist literary criticism provide a set of concepts to analyse literature. Marxism, even though a philosophical in its orientation, stresses on the practicality. Major Marxist critics attempted to develop a framework that may be applied to different domains of study. Notions like class conflicts, ideology, hegemony, and base-superstructure are seminal in the Marxist analysis. In addition, the notions like reification, commodification, interpellation, alienation, marginalization, state apparatus, over-determinism, decentring, relative autonomy enable critics to explore complex literary texts. In general practice, Marxist literary critics analyse literary work at two levels- surface and hidden. They also explore literary devices like metaphors, images, irony, and paradox used by the writers. Hidden or denotative aspect of literary text then is linked with the basic Marxist notions like class struggle, ideological apparatus, and sociology of literature. The role of social context is evaluated in the formation of literary texts. In addition, the Marxist literary critics focus

interlinks between literary forms and ideological currents. They generally politicize the literary form, that is to state how political context determines specific literary form. These can be referred as the most striking features of Marxist literary criticism. Towards the end, let us come to the relevance of Marxism in Literary Theory in the present context. It is frequently argued that Marxism and its forms have failed as the political system throughout the world.

### **Relevance of Marxist literary criticism**

Marxist literary criticism will remain relevant for several reasons. It has always helped us develop our worldview. It teaches us to be critical, encourages us to raise doubts. It encourages to reject what is being imposed and think independently and differently. If Marxism continues to inspire and encourage people to think logically, independently, and unconventionally, it will continue to influence the masses. Marxist literary criticism has undergone a lot of changes. However, it is necessary to mention that a strong supporter and believer in Marxist political theory should also practice it. Marxist criticism is not a one-way approach. Marxist literary criticism will be relevant as long as thinkers continue to think in a dialectical manner, as long as thinkers continue to disagree with others, and as long as others continue to disagree with thinkers. Notably, Marxism underwent several changes. It never remained static. Marxism is progressive, it reveals itself, it criticizes itself, and it problematizes itself.

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