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Research Article

Marxism and Literature: Marxist Analysis of 'The Garden Party'

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Abstract

Marxism largely deals with social behaviour of an individual towards others especially belonging to other set of society. Though numerous research works have been done on Marxism with reference to literature, psychology, sociology etc., there are still many literary genres which need to be studied through Marxist lens. Short stories generally give realistic depiction of life, so demand Marxist explanation. One such masterpiece 'The Garden Party' written by Katherine Mansfield is full of themes and characters every individual encounters frequently in life has not yet been studied in view of some economic or social theory. The current research aims to analyse this story applying Marxism to yield plurality of meanings embedded in it and to widen compass of this economic and political theory. Research technique used here is qualitative which analyses 'words and phrases' to decipher underlying theme. The findings of this research study render an insight into social condition of a common human being - subjugation of lower social class in the hands of upper class, and role of ideology to maintain this status quo. Further, it scrutinizes politics of class to observe how people are shaped, and their behaviour is affected by their social class.

Keywords: Marxism, Behaviour, Economics, Katherine Mansfield, Social Theory, Political and Economic Ideas, Super-Structure Model, Subjugation, social classes.

1. Introduction

Since last few decades literary criticism has started including economic theories under its domain owning everlasting relation between society and literature. Scott (1962) holds that art never takes birth in vacuum rather it needs society and culture to get inspiration from and respond to. Literature and economic theories largely influence each other as says Birch (1989), "a Marxist position grounds social reality in a history, struggles cantered upon class and systems of production, reflecting at any given moment a dialectical relationship between history and society." According to him, "In Marxism, this is an underlying structure that determines social reality, and that must be grasped if social reality is to be understood." In his view, the underlying structure was primarily an economic one.

Literature has always been used for promotion or rejection of economic theories and systems emerged from time to time: Miller and O'Neill exposed dreadful impact of 'capitalism' in their dramas *Death of a Salesman* and *The Hairy Ape* respectively. Grampp (1973) acknowledges role of Swift, Dequincy, Southey, Coleridge, Carlyle, Ruskin, Dickens etc., in raising social awareness regarding economic thought. In the same context, a short story, *'The Garden Party'*

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written by Katherine Mansfield has been selected to be analysed from Marxist perspective. The primary focus of this research study is to discover instances of class consciousness and examine the ways through which ideology reinforces social beliefs and mindsets. It also focuses on how the poor are completely deprived of their fundamental rights and systematically forced to spend their lives in ghettos in utter poverty.

Katherine Mansfield is considered one of the significant short story writers in the contemporary era. The significance of this research can be measured in view of its role to widen the scope of Marxism from economics to the field of literature thus exposing its impact on life of ordinary human being and society in general. Current study will open new horizons of knowledge in the fields of literature and economics by widening scope of interdisciplinary research. The objectives of the study are:

- To wed dully factual theories of economics and literature.
- To blur existing boundaries between economics and literature in order to develop an interdisciplinary approach.
- To widen compass of Marxist theory and analyse *'Garden Party'* by Katherine Mansfield in order to produce plurality of meaning.

2. Literature Review

Marxist literary criticism is based on political and economic theories of German philosopher Karl Marx. In works like *The German Ideology (1846)* and *The Communist Manifesto* (1848), written with Frederick Engels, Marx proposes a model of history in which economic and political conditions determine social conditions. Marx and Engels were responding to social hardships stemming from the rise of capitalism. Appropriately, their theories are formulated specifically to analyse how society functions in a state of upheaval and constant change. In the preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* Karl Marx sets forth one of the basic notions of Marxist criticism, the notion of the "superstructure":

> In the social production which men carry on they enter into definite relations that are indispensable and independent of their will; these relations of production correspond to a definite stage of development of their material powers of production. The totality of the relations of production constitutes the economic structure of society - the real foundation, on which legal and political superstructures arise and to which definite forms of social consciousness correspond. The mode of production of material life determines the general character of the social, political, and spiritual processes of life (Cited in Jay, 1993: p. 257).

2.1. The Base and Superstructure Model

Within Marx's dialectical account of history is the idea that a given individual's social being is determined by larger political and economic forces. He says, "It is not the consciousness of men that determines their being, but on the contrary, their social being determines their consciousness" (1865: p. 165). Simply stated, the social class into which a person is born determines his outlook and viewpoints. Marx then expands this concept of determination into one of the central concepts of Marxism—that of base and superstructure. The base is economic

system on which superstructure rests; cultural activities—such as philosophy or literature—belong to superstructure. To Marxist critics, a society's economic base determines the interests and styles of its literature; it is this relationship between determining base and determined superstructure that is the main point of interest for Marxist critics.

Moreover, from the economic base, emerges a "superstructure" including a government that functions to legitimise the capitalist class that has economic means of production. The superstructure also consists of "forms of social consciousness" the aesthetic, ethical, political, and religious ideologies that also serve to legitimise the power of the ruling class. Marx also has commented:

> The ideas of the ruling class are, in every age, the ruling ideas, i.e., the class which is dominant material force in society is at the same time its dominant intellectual force. The class which has the means of material production at its disposal has control at the same time over the means of mental production so that in consequence the ideas of those who lack the means of mental production are, in general, subject to it. The dominant ideas are nothing more than the ideal expression of the dominant material relationships, the dominant material relationships grasped as ideas, and thus of the relation- ships which make one class the ruling one; they are consequently the ideas of its dominance (Cited in Jay, 1993: p. 273).

Art in general and literature in particular, in this sense is part of the superstructure. It is part of the complex ideological structure of social perception which ensures that the situation in which one social class has power over the others is either seen by most members of the society as "natural" or not seen at all. Understanding literature involves understanding the social process of which it is a part. Studying works of literature should include an attempt to understand the social context, especially the basic ideological rationalizations in which the works are rooted (Eagleton, 1976: p. 5).

2.2. Different Theorists and Marxist Approach

There is a great deal of difference in opinion among Marxist literary critics concerning relationship between ideology and literature. Since Marx's own writing, theorists such as the Soviet social realists, Lukacs, and Althusser have gradually modified or expanded Marx's original concepts. The Soviet socialist realists believe that because ideology is part of superstructure, it must correspond to the economic base of society. In their view, literature inevitably reflects economic base; there is no way that it can function outside of the strict base/superstructure model. Like social realists, Lukacs believes that realism in literature is the only way to interpret human condition truthfully because it recognizes that human nature is inseparable from social realities. Narrative detail will be significant only when it expresses dialectic characteristics between humans-as-individuals and humans-as-social-beings. Lukacs distinguishes between the two kinds of realism, socialist realism, and critical realism. However, Lukacs and the social realists have a limited perspective. They both fail to recognize that there are some legitimate works which fall outside such a literal reading of the base and the superstructure model.

The Italian theorist Gramsci, with his concept of hegemony, allows for an even more flexible reading of the base/superstructure model. Gramsci believes that ideology alone cannot explain

extent to which people are willing to accept dominant values. He also realizes, along with many other Marxist critics, that the base/superstructure model is much too rigid to account for cultural productions which do not simply reinforce those dominant values. In a way, Gramsci's notion of hegemony is a continuation of the concepts behind ideology. Hegemony is a sort of deception in which the individual forgets her own desires and accepts dominant values as their own. Literature, then, may be seen as something that both reinforces dominant values and occasionally calls them into question. For example, nineteenth century women writers of sentimental fiction used certain narrative conventions merely to reinforce dominant values, whereas a writer like Jane Austen used many of the same conventions to undermine the same dominant values.

The French theorist Althusser considers relationship between literature and ideology. For him, this also includes an understanding of hegemony. Althusser (2009) suggests that ideology and hegemony, like literature, present a constructed version of reality, one which does not necessarily reflect the actual conditions of life. Thus, literature neither merely reflects ideology, nor can it be reduced to it. Literature may be situated within ideology, but it can also distance itself from ideology--thereby allowing the reader to gain an awareness of the ideology on which it is based. For example, a novel may present the world in a way that seems to support dominant ideologies, but as a work of fiction it also reveals those ideologies. So, once again, although literature itself cannot change society, it can be an active part of such changes.

The Frankfurt School of Marxism rejected social realism altogether by giving a privileged position to art and literature. These alone can resist the domination of a totalitarian state. Popular art inevitably colludes with the economic system that shapes it, whereas Modernism has the power to question. Art acts as an irritant, a negative knowledge of the real world. Their critical theory advocates an art that makes the down-trodden masses aware of their exploitation and helplessness fragmental atonal work.

The Frankfurt school focused intently on the technology and culture, indicating how technology was becoming both a major force of production and formative mode of social organization and control. In an article, "Some Social Implications of Modern Technology," Marcuse argued that technology in the contemporary era constitutes an entire "mode of organizing and perpetuating (or changing) social relationships, a manifestation of prevalent thought and behaviour patterns, an instrument for control and domination" (1941: p. 414). In the realm of culture, technology produced mass culture that habituated individuals to conform to the dominant patterns of thought and behaviour, and thus provided powerful instruments of social control and domination.

2.3. Marxism and Literature

Marxist literary critics tend to look for tensions and contradictions within literary works. This is appropriate because Marxism was originally formulated to analyse just such tensions and contradictions within society. Marxist literary theories tend to focus on representation of class conflict as well as reinforcement of class distinctions through medium of literature. Marxist theorists use traditional techniques of literary analysis but subordinate aesthetic concerns to the final social and political meanings of literature. In keeping with the totalizing spirit of Marxism, literary theories arising from the Marxist paradigm have not only sought new ways of understanding the relationship between economic production and literature, but of all cultural production. Marxist analyses of society and history have had a profound effect on literary

theory and practical criticism, most notably in the development of "new historicism" and "cultural materialism."

Marxist criticism is also defined as an approach to literature that focuses on 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 socioeconomic interests that too often advance capitalist interests such as money and power rather than socialist 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 strong emphasis on the political aspects of texts, Marxist criticism focuses more on the content and themes of literature than on its form.

Royanian and Omrani (2016) while studying the commodification and class oppression in Shakespeare's writing assert that Marxism has always been present in unconscious of the writers as Marx and Engels state, "the history of all hitherto existing societies is the history of class struggles" (p. [219]). Marx, although was born long after emergence of Shakespeare's, *The Merchant of Venice*, it reflects role of capitalism and ideologies in suppressing economically marginalized people. So, it is absolute truth that though Marx named capitalism and commodification, yet they have always been a part of human history. Likewise, Awan and Raza (2016) studied *Animal Farm* (1945) and *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949) from Marxist perspective to examine role of ideologies in creation of dystopian world. They have interlinked Marxism and dystopia concluding that these arise from and give rise to each other. They maintained that both these novels are saturated with elements of Marxism. Similarly, John (2017) in *A Microcosm of Life and Death: Review of The Ministry of Utmost Happiness,* criticized the gulf existing between poor and rich by applying Marxist theory. He depicted a group of marginalized people living in graveyard painfully but the *Jannat* this marginalized section makes is full of peace and comfort where there is no exploitation of poor at the hands of rich, and everyone is destined for same life. In line with such research studies made by applying Marxism to decipher hidden social realities of life, following is the detail regarding application of Marxism for current research.

3. Research Methodology

Following three steps considered helpful in analysing a text by applying Marxist theory have been applied for analysing data based on selected text i.e., *'The Garden Party'*- a short story. Step one recommends approaching the text with focus to investigate how different characters interact. Marxist thought relies on relationships between individuals, and even those aspects of relationships that are 'social' can be part of a Marxist critique. Step two suggests evaluating the vocational roles of all characters. The Marxist critique includes a focus on a "class system" where the vocations of characters provide the most direct reference to their place within this system. Attention is also paid to level of luxury that individuals have and how much they have to work. While step three requires looking at how characters use their free time. Part of Marxist critique is based on the argument that individuals can use free time productively. Examining the free choices of individuals is actually a large part of Marxist literary criticism.

At macro level, analysis of the story is made by applying super-structure model of Marxist theory, according to which the social class into which a person is born determines his outlook,

value system and viewpoints. The main theme of this story is the effect of class distinctions: how people are shaped and how their behaviour is affected by the class to which they belong. Along with this, Mansfield's critique of the elite class, their superficial attitudes, selfish concerns, and objectionable treatment of the poor is obvious in various aspects of the story: the setting, characters and the symbols.

4. Discussion and Findings

The story revolves around Laura Sheridan, a young girl, who belongs to privileged upper class. She lives in a large house and near it is a small cluster of shabby cottages where lives the poor folk of that area. Her family is throwing a garden party that evening and they spend most of the morning in preparation for the event. However, as the hour of the party draws near, news reaches them that a worker who lived in one of the cottages has been killed, and he left behind a widow and "half a dozen kids". Laura panics and wonders how they will cancel the party, since it seems insensitive to be celebrating while there is a funeral taking place in such a close proximity. However, the rest of the family members seem amused by Laura's concern and later Laura is made convinced, due to fascination of a hat which transforms her and makes her look stunning, that her reaction was "extravagant". She enjoys the party and complements she gets because of the hat. After the party is over, Laura's mother suggests that Laura should take a basket of left-over party food to widow's cottage. She goes there, feeling awkward about her fancy clothes. After handing over the basket, she is forced to look at the dead man and she remarks looking at him that he is looking ''wonderful and at peace'' and leaves the cottage sobbing. She meets her brother outside and tries to tell him of her experience, but all she can say is "isn't life-" and can't find words to express her feelings.

The theme of class distinction and oblivious and indifferent attitude of the rich towards poor has been highlighted through characters of the story. All the main characters i.e., Laura, Mrs. Sheridan and Jose belong to upper social class and all the poor remain in the background as subsidiary characters just to add to the theme of the story. Laura is protagonist of the story. Through her character the writer highlights the class distinction and criticises the attitude of the rich. She is portrayed as an upper-class girl in training. Initially she seems to be aware of the binary opposition of rich and poor which she refers as "absurd class distinctions". When some workmen come to put up a marquee for the party, she is struck by the impressive yet friendly and good-natured men and feels that she can relate to these men better and wonders why she can't have them as her friends rather than the "silly boys" from her own social class. Giving herself up to the informality of the occasion, she shows just how much she despises "stupid convention" by taking a big bite of her bread and the butter which makes her feel "just like a work-girl".

Here comes role of social circle and upbringing in making of personality as her social upbringing creeps into her acts and when she approaches the workmen to give orders about the marquee she tries to look "severe and even a little bit short- sighted". Later, when a workman advises that a marquee must be put up where it can give one a "bang slap in the eye", her upbringing makes her wonder whether it is "respectful" of a workman to be talking to her in such manner. This class conflict continuous in her mind throughout the story. Later, once again she seems to identify herself with the poor folk when she hears of death of a poor worker and immediately says to stop everything i.e., cancel the party. Though her family did not agree, she remains convinced that the party is disrespectful, the poor people are their neighbour, and she thinks of "what the band would sound like to that poor woman".

The effects of bourgeois ideology and how the minds are programmed into a specific way seem to be seeping through out the story. Her mother gifts her a hat to wear, new hat makes her look "striking" and the poor widowed woman takes a backseat as Laura admires her new look and gets engaged in party. Later, at the end of the function, on the way to the widow she feels none of the previous sympathy for the poor family and keeps thinking about the garden party and what a success it was; "kisses, voices, tinkling spoons, laughter, and the smell of crushed grass were somehow inside her… she had no room for anything else". However, her inner conscious continuously knocks and makes her to be ashamed of her bright and colourful dress. And, at the end of the story she comes out of the cottage sobbing and bewildered but could not express her natural feelings to anybody – endorsing Marx's views regarding the ideology and programming of minds.

Thus, the writer emphasises how Laura's natural human sympathy is tamed and the amount and form of expression of her sympathy is determined by economy and class. Her mother and sister say that "people like that don't expect sacrifices from us''. Her social class, in this way dictates her that she should not show any concern for those who are below her in status and she makes her journey from "I don't understand" on the reaction of her mother and sister on the death of the worker to the feeling that her reaction on the death of the poor worker was "extravagant". Thus, she is being alienated from her humanity, and thus the theme of class distinction acting as a barrier to humanity is stressed.

Determining of self by social class is quite obvious in the character of Mrs. Sheridan - an archetypal rich snob whose actions are determined entirely by her class norms. When Laura tells her about death of the poor worker, her immediate response is "not in the garden?" and, she "sighed with relief" when told that he did not die in her garden and says in a very insensitive way "I can't understand how they keep alive in those pokey little holes". When Laura tries to make her realise that it is "terrible heartless" of them to go ahead and have party when there is a funeral nearby, she answers by saying "it is not very sympathetic to spoil everybody's enjoyment". In this way the writer reveals her alienation by stressing that she is so blinded by class issues and obsessed with desire to maintain and uphold her high status that she loses basic human sensitivity. She, even when sending leftover party food to the poor widow suggests Laura to take some of the bright pink arum lilies along, because, according to her "people of that class are so impressed by arum lilies."

To reveal insensitive and self-cantered psyche of upper social class, different characters have been used as tools. Jose, Laura's sister is one such character through which Mansfield condemns upper class attitude. Through her attitude writer brings forth what Marxist criticism points out as "effects of capital on human psyche" and thus the poor are made to believe that this is way things are supposed to go, without any realisation of their exploitation. She is described as ordering the servants around. Instructing them to do one thing after another. She "loved giving orders to the servants… and they loved obeying her". After issuing the order to the poor workmen she is shown enjoying piano which again strikes difference of lifestyle of the poor and the rich. Her attitude towards the death was very insensitive and she says to Laura that she can't bring back the "drunken workman" back to life by stopping the party and thus strips the dead man of his dignity.

Class distinction is also highlighted through setting of the story, by creating contrast between the rich and the poor. There are two settings of the story: one is the house belonging to Sheridans; upper-class family and the other are the cottages of the poor folk. The Sheridans'

house is a luxurious one with a large garden having a large variety of flowers, which seem to have been visited by "archangels". However, the cottages are described as "little men dwellings" which had "no right to be in that neighbourhood at all". Further they are described as "disgusting and sordid". Nonetheless, Sheridans' house is described as being on the top of hill, whereas the cottages are below the house, at the foot of the hill, which symbolically hit at the point which according to Marx doctrine is that in the society the rich or upper class always dominate the poor or in other words keep them below and always rule them.

The mood depicted in the story i.e., pleasure, enjoyment and celebration in Sheridans' family and that of grief, gloom and misery in poor workman's cottage also reflects the real-life situation of both these social classes in a society where the poor can enjoy but, the leftover of the upper class. likewise, the difference between the lives of the rich and the poor is depicted through the difference between the party and the funeral- one enchanted with pleasure and the other dies at the same time.

Laura's hat has also been used as another important symbol by the author which can be interpreted as representation or source of false consciousness. In the start she was quite upset from the death of old man and had deep concern for the poor family, but, as soon as the mother gifts her hat and she wear it, she becomes self-centred and starts just thinking of how charming she was looking then remained busy in enjoying and cherishing the successful party they had, with no traces of sympathy for the poor family. This reflects what Marxism terms as development of conscious by the social surrounding. Thus, it can be said that '*The garden Party'* by Mansfield criticises class system in the society by throwing light on the ways the poor are being treated in the hands of the rich. Its story and characters represent according to Lashari, "line of demarcation between the bourgeois (superstructure) and the proletariat (base structure)" (2008: p. 5).

5. Conclusion

The current research work is qualitative in nature, primarily relying on research method of textual analysis, following the steps used in examining any text from Marxist angle. This work is limited to '*The Garden Party'* by Mansfield. None of the earlier research works on literature has yet targeted this short story to explore reflection of Marxism in literary writings. This research study gives reader an insight into social condition of a common human being and subjugation of lower social class in the hands of upper social class. In order to manifest these ideas writer has attempted to scrutinize "the politics of class" to observes socio-economic circumstances of individuals and societies. Super-structure model of Marxist theory holds that social class to which one belongs determines his outlook, value system and viewpoints.

The same is main theme of this story: effect of class distinctions - how people are shaped, and their behaviour is affected by their social class. Along with this, Mansfield's critique of the elite class, their superficial attitudes, concerns, and objectionable treatment of the poor is obvious throughout the story. This study is among initiatives for inaugural of new horizons of research regarding application of economic theories on literary works. Hence, further research may add credibility to the results of this study by applying such theories on different literary works to reflect their impact on human life in general.

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