



MARXIST CRITICISM

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ABSTRACT

The origin of the sociological approach to literature dates back to the early Greek thinkers. Sociological Criticism starts with the simple conviction that relations of arts to society are vitally important and that the investigation of these relationship may organize and deepen one's aesthetic response to a work of art. Art is not created in a vacuum, it is a social product and hence a proper understanding of any art including literature is bound up with a study of the particular social system that has given shape to it. The Sociological Critic is primarily interested in exploring the social milieu and the extent and the manner in which the artist responds to it. Although the sociological approach to literature has been widely used by critics in the earlier years, it was with the spreading of the ideas of 'Karl Marx' that this approach become a scientific method of literary interpretation.

INTRODUCTION

Origin :-

Karl Marx (1818-1883), a German philosopher and Friedrich Engels(1820-1895), a German social scientist are the joint founders of what is called Marxism. The two Germans met in England and formulated a theory which they called Communism in their 'Communist Manifesto' in 1848.

The basic tenets of Marxism can be summarised as follows in the words of Marx himself :
The philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways the point is to change it. It

DR. NILISH A. TARE

1 Page



is not the consciousness of men that determines their living but on the contrary their social being that determines their Consciousness.

Marx actually reversed the formulation of the 18th century German philosopher Hegel, and his followers who thought that the world is governed by thought. According to Marx, all mental / ideal systems are the products of social and economic existence. In traditional Marxist thinking, Marx and Engels viewed, 'morality, religion and philosophy' as 'Fantoms formed in brains of men' and everything is determined by the nature of the economic base, this is known as 'Economic determinism.'

Basics :-

- I. In the twentieth century Marxist critics emphasized the relationship between literature and society and the social change evidenced in literature. Literature, so far, was considered a reflection of society but society undergoes a continuous process of change which would inevitably be projected in literature.

Marx and Engels thought that the essence, the nature and function of literature and art, could be understood only by relating it to the prevailing social conditions and by analyzing the social system as a whole. Literature and art as considered by them are forms of social consciousness and social change is bound to create changes in literature and art.

- II. Marx's main concern is to demonstrate the relationship between the material mode of production and the aesthetic or artistic production. It is in this context that he talks about the superstructure, an idea that has been attacked again and again by various critics. This idea expressed in 'The German Ideology' can be summed up in the following way. Productive methods determine the character of a culture. The forms of consciousness are determined by the social being of men. The economic structure is the foundation, on which rise the superstructure. The social change or the social reaction of the base and the superstructure. The social change or the social revolution is brought about by complex process of mutual action and reaction of the base and superstructure. This leads up to another point of vital importance i.e. the assumption that material activity and material intercourse ultimately create consciousness. Hence, extreme importance of 'Praxis' in Marxist ideology. As Marx said, "It is not the consciousness that determines life, but life determines consciousness."
- III. According to Marxists, the view that literature, particularly poetry, is an expression of divine inspiration or an inner subjective pressure of a mysterious nature is untrue and

DR. NILISH A. TARE

2 Page



untenable. Infact, the nature and mode of economic production create social relation, in which men enter to form class relations and these class relations formed, legitimized and fostered in a particular way on the mental level, became the ideology the society. In the Marxist view literature and art try to stabilize the ideology.

- IV. Contrary to popular understanding, the Marxist approach to literature is not reductive and mechanical since it recognizes the complexity of the way in which the social consciousness transforms itself into ideology and finally into art. This is evident from what Engels said : “Political, juridical, philosophical, religious, literary, artistic etc. development is based on economic development. But all this react upon one another and also upon economic base.”

It is obvious then that no single factor can be considered as entirely responsible for the creation or the formation of literature. The potential determinants that give character to literature are not merely rooted in the economic structure, the base, but are contained in various elements including the material, the conceptual, the emotional and the social elements. The Marxist theory of culture implies diversity and complexity. It also recognizes continuity and dynamism without disregarding autonomy of various fields of human life. It is neither reductive nor anarchic. The Marxist view of literature as mediation of culture recognizes diversity and autonomy but necessarily relates literature to the social existence of man.

V. **Influence of Althusser :-**

In the second half of the twentieth century a number of efforts have been made to revise and reinterpret Marxist theories. Among these, the work of ‘Louis Althusser’ merits special attention.

He accepts the arguments of Engels and argues that art ‘make us see’, in distanced way, ‘the ideology from it is born, in which it bathes, from which it detachers itself as art and to which it alludes.’ As for all Marxists, ideology is an important notion for Althusser. According to Althusser it is a representation of the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence. But art or literature achieves a fictional distance or ‘retreat’ from the ideology of the creator. Althusser’s notion of ‘relative autonomy’ takes art and literature away from the crudity of the ‘economic determinism’ and base / superstructure frame postulated by conventional Marxism. Althusser uses another expression, over determinism, which names an effect arising from a variety of causes acting together rather than just the economic factor. Althusser argues that the economic structure will construct ideological practices

DR. NILISH A. TARE

3 Page



which in turn, will influence, art and literature in last instance, this in way, follows the argument of Marx and Engels that good art has a degree of freedom from the prevailing economic conditions which are its 'ultimate determinants.'

- VI. No discussion of sociological or Marxist approach to literature must stop without mentioning the contributions of two contemporary thinkers. Fredric Jameson in America and Terry Eagleton in England who have made valuable contributions to literary criticism by applying Marxist paradigms to different literary work in English. Eagleton rejects Althusser's view that literature can distance itself from ideology and views literature as a complex networking of the existing ideological discourses. He demonstrates the inter-relations between ideology and literary form in the novels from those of George Eliot to D. H. Lawrence.

It is clear that as long as literature remains a social institution reflecting social problems, the sociological approach will remain a strong force in literary criticism.

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