
UNIT 1 MARXISM AND LITERATURE

Structure

- 1.0 Objectives
- 1.1 Introduction
- 1.2 What is Marxism?
- 1.3 Marxism as a Way of Looking at Social Developments
- 1.4 Marxism as Opposed both to Religious-Moral Idealism and Mechanical Materialism
- 1.5 Relevance of Marxism to literature
- 1.6 Marxism and Literary Criticism
- 1.7 Let Us Sum Up
- 8.8 Questions
- 1.9 Glossary

1.0 OBJECTIVES

After reading this unit hopefully you will be able to

- define Marxism as a political, social and cultural ideology
- explain how Marxism can help us to understand literature and
- distinguish how Marxism as a literary critical approach is different from other approaches to our study of literature.

1.1 INTRODUCTION

Marxism has been defined variously: as an approach, a world outlook, a theory and a philosophy of action. Marxism is all these, depending upon the context in which we talk about it. For instance, if we have to consider a question linked with a political development, Marxism as an approach would be more suitable for us. In literature, we use marxism as essentially a world outlook, something that tells us about the author's mind and the nature of his thought. Marxism as a theory would be more appropriately explained as a critical method with whose help we raise pertinent questions about the actual practice of an author, when we examine his/her ideology (another loaded word that we discuss in the later pages of this block) to find out how much of it is real, rational and, therefore, acceptable. This last definition is more pertinent to the study of life and behaviour under 'social sciences.' The concept of action separates Marxism from all earlier philosophies, which only interpret the world, "while the point is to change it." This means that Marxism's central point is to change the world through collective social action.

Definitions do not end here. Still more descriptions and definitions can be added to the ones we have given here so that the vast range of meanings associated with the term can be highlighted. However, let us go into the reason why Marxism is still so debated today. Difficulty about how to comprehend Marxism in our time has largely arisen because of different applications of this approach to concrete conditions in socialist and other societies in the twentieth century. What we have seen happening in Russia since the October Revolution is totally at variance with events in China. Similarly, upheavals violently rocking the societies in Eastern Europe have pointed towards an altogether new kind of politics. Marxist practice in the twentieth century has been a combination of state control, democracy, and bourgeois tendencies in politics and individualism among people in general. In all this, Marxist leadership has been found wanting in many respects, thus giving rise to a number of revolts against the very system. The state in Socialist Russia as well as a number of other countries in Eastern Europe has been turned upside down. We cannot make head or tail of the

events that have overtaken our world in the name of radical change under a preconceived Marxist framework. In fact, our language falters ("preconceived Marxist framework" is one example!) as we ponder over the political and philosophical-cultural issues that our world confronts today. That is what we see in the name of Marxist practice in socialist countries. At the same time, we cannot overlook the attack on Marxism launched by those centres of power, which support racism, religious intolerance and social injustice. These power centres are capitalist. To them, Marxism appears to be a dangerous opponent who is out to put an end to their control and supremacy in the world. Also look at the philosophies these centres propagate – individualism, consumerism and abstract spiritualism are some of the strategic philosophic devices they use to distract attention from the relevance of Marxism.

Most of the recent criticism of Marxism by its opponents lacks substance. It is narrow, shrill and motivated. Those who have no positive alternative to offer – who would be content to prove Marxism as another liberal-bourgeois or sectarian-fundamentalist theory, which they can discuss and discard, make it. In earlier periods, particularly around World War I, thinkers have felt so weak, uncertain and helpless in the face of the supporters of commitment that at the first sign of contradiction (there is no doubt that these contradictions are serious, violent and daunting, as stated above), emerging out of Marxist practice, they have tended to react with excessive vehemence. It appears that the situation prevailing in Russia and Eastern European socialist countries today has presented an opportunity to many antagonists of Marxism to raise the issue of individual identity in a new way. If one thought objectively, the biggest threat to such an identity could be seen as coming straight from the forces of market and finance in the modern world. It means that 'identity' has been a new catch phrase used by vested interests to defend capitalism. Who can deny that capitalism stifles the growth of the individual and reduces him or her to the level of a mere consumer without real choice and initiative. As we have noticed, it eliminates the human being in society by turning people into objects and commodities that are available in the market for sale. Things have become so bad that even writers and artist, let alone ordinary people, opt for nothing better than a job, which should actually be seen as a mere venture for earning bread. This obviously is not what writers in particular and others in general should look for. The number of those writers is growing who are sensitive enough to see the deleterious effect of capitalism on the human psyche and sensibility. They critique capitalism in their poems, plays and novels and exhibit their clear disgust with its narrow self-centred ways.

1.2 WHAT IS MARXISM?

Marxism sees different phenomena in the environment as a part of the larger social reality. This sounds rather simple. From this we infer that since we live in a society, whatever we think, feel or believe in, would necessarily be a part of our society and, therefore, reflect upon the social reality surrounding us. Organised under a specific system of production and distribution, a society exerts immense amount of pressure on its members. At the same time, according to Marxism, individuals or groups in a society, moulded as they are by the forces of production and distribution, are not totally helpless in their environment. In fact, classes of people, the haves and have-nots, remain in constant clash with one another and strive to establish or retain their supremacy in the structure they operate in. Marxism tells us that class struggle is the essence of a society and nothing happening in society can be adequately explained without reference to this fact. At the philosophical level, Marxism provides investigative-analytical methods, superior, objective and scientific, to study and assess the phenomena of history. Through an application of these methods, various historical phenomena can be probed and comprehended in their fullness and interconnection. The Marxist method of enquiry and analysis is called the dialectical method under which the contending and opposing elements of a phenomenon are

seen as linked to each other in an ever-changing process. This means that when two elements clash, they should be studied and judged with reference to the structure that produced them. At the same time, the clash is a positive and productive clash in which a struggle for resolving the conflict may also be noticed. The dialectical method shows how the very survival of a structure rests on its different conflicting elements. Seen dialectically, a historical phenomenon is both a product of one particular phenomenon and the producer of the other. For this reason, Marxism assigns a deeper significance to terms such as "society" and "social reality" and makes us aware of the fact that society is a living and changing reality subject to the laws of history, such as the class struggle, the role and function of the state and radical restructuring of society by actual political formations. Growth and development are the outcome of important conflicts taking place between groups, sections and classes of people. To repeat, social reality is more than mere information about the various components of a society, which we cannot grasp unless the "facts" and aspects of a society are seen in their interconnection. What I mean is that there is something in society, which can explain for us the reasons behind a phenomenon. The writer of literature is supposed, therefore, to have a fairly intimate knowledge of his society.

1.3 MARXISM AS A WAY OF LOOKING AT SOCIAL DEVELOPMENTS

As I have said above, this theory insists that society or the social organisation of a particular time be viewed as part of a whole series of changes taking place in history. Our notice is drawn many a time to the fact that the process of economic production and distribution is a vital constituent of organised human life. But do we realise to what extent these influence or determine the way we live in society? My answer is that a social organisation is largely deterministic with its different agencies 'telling' its members what to do and think. But looked at in another way, new happenings quite frequently burst forth on the scene and give the lie to the dictates of a system. This points to the veiled and hidden forces of change that are always active in society.

So far, we have talked of the deterministic aspect of society. Here, we can take up the idea of people as agents of change that sooner or later transform the way people act and think. To illustrate this point of relationship between social changes and human life, let us take the example of two important happenings in Europe – the French Revolution towards the end of the eighteenth century and the Industrial Revolution in England in the second and third decades of the nineteenth century. These two left a lasting impression on the society of France and England respectively. The French Revolution made the doctrine of equality among human beings acceptable as never before, something for the cause of which people would stake their lives. The notion of equality among people was new and inspiring. It also violated the prevailing norms of hierarchy. As is common knowledge, the upsurge of the French masses against the feudal yoke unleashed forces of progress in a big way, which established a regime of free enterprise and democracy. Hitherto oppressed, the common people of France moved inexorably towards the centre-stage. Literature did not remain untouched by this development. The energy and passion in the French fiction of the nineteenth century can be clearly linked up with the social upheaval in France in the last decade of the eighteenth century. Who is the central figure in the French novels of the period if not an ordinary villager or city dweller, a middle class individual, a small trader, a clerk or a poet? The basic concern of the writer in France became the behaviour of the common people vis-à-vis the vast changes that had swept the nation. We should mark the language of these novels, which the ordinary French used at the market place. It is a vehicle of expression of day-to-day experiences, vibrant with the common idiom.

I do not say that all writers adopted a particular attitude towards social happenings and considered them sympathetically, or that all of them were radical. Some of them retained a conservative approach in their lives. However, the point to emphasise is that all of them took note of the new relationships based on equality, honest endeavour and collective enterprise. They also appreciated the changed perceptions of people. Their writing gave a sharp focus to these developments and interpreted them as important aspects of French life.

Coming to the Industrial Revolution in England, we can say that it did not appear as spectacular as the French Revolution. It had no heroes and villains. Nor did it have contending armies in its midst that fought for political changes. It is called 'revolution' in the sense that it changed the social landscape of England by decisively shifting the movement of life in the direction of industrialism. The rural production and life dependent on age-old use of land ceased to be the dominant mode of existence as more and more people flocked to the cities in search of bread and butter. The city also opened up new avenues of progress. Can we forget that because of large-scale production under capitalism, life in England began to be governed more and more by new democratic laws that were framed by the English parliament?

Historically, no doubt, the trend went back to the seventeenth century, but the Industrial Revolution in the nineteenth century gave a decisively sharper edge to the phenomenon. Keep this in mind note that the novels of Dickens and George Eliot capture an England that has an entirely new set of questions confronting it. Descriptions of poverty and inequality are so stark in Dickens's novels and their link with the expansion of industry is so strong that the reader cannot link the representation with anything written before. The novels of Dickens are clearly rooted in the reality of mid-nineteenth century England. In the same way, we come across such protagonists in George Eliot's novels as are closely identifiable – middle-class individuals with a new kind of sensitivity and inner life. Undeniably, the development of industrial production in England inspired this powerful fictional trend. Once again, we do not see in this fiction a simple reflection of society but a treatment of issues from so many different points of view in a society that is caught in the process of change. We should also notice that under the impact of the Industrial Revolution, most of the writers of the day became sympathetic towards the common masses and picked up characters from among them for projecting deep human urges and interests. Characters from the upper classes represented in nineteenth century fiction look insipid and lifeless in comparison. The point is that looked at from the angle of important historical developments, literary works put forward an altogether new idea. From the Marxist point of view, literary works are not myths or fables retold or characters caught in a plot-structure but instead representations of important trends. In this sense, fiction and poetry become areas in which the processes of change live a crystallised existence.

1.4 MARXISM AS OPPOSED TO BOTH IDEALISM AND MECHANICAL MATERIALISM

It is common knowledge that almost all religious philosophies are critical of the narrow self-seeking tendencies in man's behaviour and stress upon the importance of people moving out of the worldly domain of existence. When we look at our world from the view of idealism we always judge things as approximating to the idea, the perfect idea, which precedes the material phenomenon. What idealism does not notice is that idea, the very core of all natural and social phenomenon, being perfect, is static, it does not have change as its integral part. According to idealism, what changes is the environment, which is supposed to approximate to the perfect idea, which is there as a permanent factor. The permanent, unchanging idea remaining ever the same over and above the constraints of time and space, is something that cannot grasp the factors of change, growth and progress, all essential features of human history and society. In fact, in all historical phenomena, complexities of social,

ideological and cultural structures, psychological-spiritual ambiguities and paradoxes remain outside the reach of religious idealism. To religious idealism, these would at best be a simple manifestation of the human effort to reach the perfect idea of Godliness. At the same time, religious idealism may place the entire spectrum of 'worldly experiences' under the negative category of false and illusory practices (T.S.Eliot's "unreal city," for instance) that come in the way of the progress of the soul. If such a view criticises the modern ways of social life, its utilitarianism and consumerism as unsatisfying and non-fulfilling, it does so by entirely diluting the dynamism and vigour of human and social intercourse.

The opposite of idealism is mechanical materialism. Marxism is critical of this view for its excessive emphasis on a particular environment to understand human behaviour. There are accounts and descriptions of human conduct in fiction where characters are captured through mundane and trivial details and in which vital connections between the infinity of facts are hard to find (in George Eliot's novels, for example). Marxism rejects this view as negative and pessimistic since 'mind' or 'spirit' as an integral part of material existence are absent in it. In fact, Marxism radically critiques the duality of mind and matter and lays a great deal of emphasis on mind being "a specific mode of matter," not outside or independent of matter.

The mind-matter controversy is resolved in Marxism, therefore, in a dialectical way – the two are not separate and separable but live in interconnection – mind in fact is only a distinct mode of existence of matter. If we see any growth and development in thought, culture, science and ideology, it is only a broad reflection of the socio-historical phenomenon, the concrete world of matter in the human mind, which like everything else is also a product of human endeavour in history. The complexity and richness of the cultural-literary, spiritual-religious or psychological-sociological discourses can thus be examined and understood if they are seen in relation to the historical phenomenon outside their respective domains. This philosophical view informs and marks behind all discussions of literary trends and developments in this block. However, I explain it a bit further in the following section.

1.5 RELEVANCE OF MARXISM TO LITERATURE

Since Marxism lays stress upon the importance of history within which various social and cultural trends emerge, it gives a new dimension to the study of literature. It is with the help of Marxism that we comprehend the relationship between a writer and his/her society. This relationship is that of a sensitive individual with his/her environment. This individual is deeply concerned with the conditions of people around him/her. S/he recognises the existence of not merely pain and anguish but also anger and a sense of resistance in their lives. At the same time, the writer notices among people the great urge to enjoy, celebrate and be happy. This makes him/her combine within their writing the different human emotions of melancholy, disquiet as well as anger and joy. On the surface, these appear to be expressions of an individual's response. However, the writer's response has its roots in the society to which s/he belongs and, therefore, reflects upon the nature of his/her surroundings. Marxism does not stop at this point but takes the consideration further to the specific mode of production, the governing economic structure, which regulates the activity of men and women in a decisive way. Marxism also pinpoints the role of human beings in shaping their society through sharp questioning and active mobilisation.

How do other theories relate to literature and what function do they perform? Do they not exclusively stress upon the social background to reach the conclusion that literature is wholly determined by its environment (mechanical materialism), and say that the individual will operate unhindered by anything whatsoever and is, according to them, not subject to the laws of history and society? In the first case, literature is seen as an exact replica of its times because according to the theory of determination by society, it could not be anything better or different. Thus, characters, voices or

attitudes in a literary work are interpreted as the full and final pictures of the society that produced it with no scope for an alternative set of representation in it. In the second case, the individuals will become free from all social constraints and the criticism using the concept sees the work as operating on a much higher universal plane. For instance, this kind of criticism may separate the reference to myths in a particular work from the other things present in it and relate them in an arbitrary manner to other myths that existed in the past. Much of the anarchy in modernist criticism owes its existence to this tendency. In either case, the significance of literature as a powerful cultural endeavour is seriously undermined. By restoring to literature its ability to critique and oppose certain tendencies as also to project the creative interests of the larger masses, Marxism places this most fulfilling and meaningful human endeavour within the parameters of society and history.

To illustrate this, I briefly refer to a trend in early twentieth century writing. In this writing, one can see two clear and distinct streams of writers. To the former stream belong poets such as W.H. Auden, C. Day Lewis and Luis Macniece and to the latter belong W.B. Yeats, Ezra Pound and T.S. Eliot. The critical intelligence and vigour of the former stems from their intense hatred for the philistinism and superficiality of culture in their time. They clearly recognised the source of this philistinism in money and privilege. On the other hand, Yeats, Pound and Eliot distrusted the common masses. These poets were unable to notice the potentiality of change in the collective action of people. In fact, they looked for inspiration towards the privileged and the elite who in their opinion were capable of transcending the lay uninformed masses. The powerful voice of overall rejection in their poetry cannot be separated from their acquiescence in, if not open approval of the existing system. An interesting aspect of this trend is that it forms the basis of cynical rootless writing that emerged in the post-Second World War period. We may ask as to why a playwright like Beckett use two tramps, floating rootless idlers and do-nothings as symbols of humanity in modern times. Without relating these trends to the class reality of the day, we cannot adequately comprehend the way in which the writers in question interpreted their environment and expressed their concrete responses to it. In this context, we cannot overlook the sharp contrast that Bertolt Brecht's plays offer to the works of Samuel Beckett. While Beckett's plays fall in the category of the drama of the absurd, not in the sense that they lack meaning and significance but that they reveal and emphasise absurdity as the central principle in modern-day human existence, Brecht's plays are characterised as heroic drama. Brecht is remarkable in his portrayal of courage and perseverance in ordinary people. The heroism, the spirit to withstand pressures in Brecht's characters is largely owing to the writer's adoption of the Marxist outlook because of which common people appear to him as carriers of a definite revolutionary fervour. Both Beckett and Brecht belong to the period around the Second World War. It could be expected that because of their sensitivity and intelligence, the two would exhibit identical social concerns. However, the fact is that Beckett concentrates upon what can be called human fate and human destiny in modern times while Brecht endeavours to bring out the creative, the noble and the heroic in the common masses of the day.

1.6 MARXISM AND LITERARY CRITICISM

In the study of literature, Marxism has influenced a host of critics in the twentieth century and has helped in the development of a cogent and full-fledged literary theory. The emergence in the nineteen thirties of the radical critical trend in England which also left its distinct mark on Leavis and his disciples bears testimony to the wider appeal and authenticity of a theory owing allegiance to materialism. Under the influence of the materialistic outlook, most of the English critics in the thirties, forties and later were constrained to take note of the importance of the historical context in literature. In our times, it is because of the growing influence of Marxism on literary criticism that the great nineteenth century fiction writers have been pulled out of an abstract appreciation and their writings have been placed in a concrete context. If the

great nineteenth century fiction writers appear to us as uncompromising crusaders, a large part of the credit should go to the historicist principle made popular by Marxist literary criticism. We have to take note of the fact that the Marxist viewpoint is at the centre of discourses contending for acceptance today. Whether it is structuralism, poststructuralism, deconstruction or end of history theory, the target invariably is the idea that common working masses can change the face of history. Marxism has compelled the contemporary thinker and critic to reconsider his narrow individual-centred stand of helplessness or the abstract moralist notion of decay in the modern world. As we are aware, structuralism swore by the concept of strongly resistant structures in language, society and culture. However, the structuralist theory was essentially deterministic in that it ignored the basic principle of human initiative (a key concept of Marxism). Marxism challenges the restraining social environment through empowerment of the working masses. It was no doubt an attempt on the part of modern bourgeois interests to negate the Marxist idea of change. Deconstruction was an attack on Marxism from a different direction. It attacked the idea of existence of the author or the narrator – the central governing principle of a representation – and rejected the notion of a centre in the text. At the same time, deconstruction's exclusive emphasis on the text (not the author or work) specifically targeted the revolutionary role of literature.

In the face of these theories, Marxist criticism has evolved still more sophisticated arguments to address fresh questions. This is manifest in the writings of Marxist critics such as Raymond Williams, Frederic Jameson and Terry Eagleton who usefully link the literary work with its author. Marxism has also helped literary criticism in evolving new materialist concepts of culture, ideology, realism, modernism, political unconscious, etc. with which to effectively counter the onslaught of bourgeois theorists. Marxist criticism also tells us about the need to combine the efforts of the writer and the reader around a literary work. It is a daunting critical task that requires of us to actively construct the meaning of the work to suit the positive humanist requirements of our age.

How should Marxist literary criticism go about the job of analysing and interpreting a work? For an answer to this question, we refer to Frederic Jameson who says that "In an area of culture, ... we are ... confronted with a choice between the study of the nature of the "objective structures" of a given cultural text (the historicity of its forms and of its content, the historical moment of emergence of its linguistic possibilities, the situation-specific function of the aesthetic) and something rather different which would instead foreground the interpretive categories or codes through which we read and receive the text in question." The question is well posed. What is of interest here is that Marxist criticism goes to both points of time irrespective of whether the author-text or the reader-text is chosen for foregrounding, whether the time and context of the author is used to understand the text or that of the reader to interpret it. Actually, Jameson's emphasis on interpretation is for the reason that a work for Marxist criticism belongs both to the past and the present (if it is written earlier) and should be made to serve those needs of the present which are linked up with the idea of radical change. This should give us an insight into the function of that criticism which is driven by the urge to give a new radical direction to the historical circumstance.

1.7 LET US SUM UP

Unlike most philosophies which consider a transcendental force or which is called idea, mind, spirit, supreme being, etc. to be at the centre of human and natural existence, Marxism asserts that it is matter which is of prime significance and whose different manifestation are idea, mind, spirit, etc. While earlier philosophies can be termed idealistic, spiritualistic and other-worldly, Marxism claims to be materialistic and this-worldly. Materialism should not be confused with utilitarianism, consumerism or hedonism. All of us know that utilitarianism and consumerism,

bereft as they are of any human value, serve only those of our needs and requirements which are physical. These tendencies, developed as they have been in the modern capitalist era, reflect merely the narrow, self-serving and opportunistic distortions of human character, which actually is social, collectivist, creative and noble. As we become aware of the limitations of consumerism today, we gradually cease to be the slaves of that world of irrational production and distribution whose chief driving force is the profit motive, not the satisfaction of physical and mental requirements of all members of society in an equitable way. If irrational production-distribution and profit motive are what consumerism manifests, how can Marxism take them as the central core of its conception. It is in this sense that Marxist materialism and the capitalist doctrine of individual-centred profit motive should be seen as two entirely different and antagonistic modes of thought.

1.8 QUESTIONS

1. Discuss the connections that exist between a literary trend and the society of its time.
2. "Marxism pinpoints the role of human beings in shaping their society." How does this idea influence the approach of a literary writer in the twentieth century?

1.9 GLOSSARY

Conservative approach:	Drawing inspiration from past tendencies and values and resisting those of the present and future.
Deconstruction:	A critical doctrine of the nineteen eighties. It rejects the notion of form in a literary work as arbitrary and suggests that the reader should look for the hidden clues that are submerged in the text.
End of ideology theory:	A new critical trend that negates the validity of ideology in present-day discussions. The reason behind the trend may be that the bourgeois outlook today has lost all hope of successfully opposing Marxism, an ideology of the working class.
Mechanical Materialism:	According to this view, ordinary happenings of life are directly related to prevailing social forces. As mere products of society, people seem to live a life of bondage in their surroundings. Also, individuals are considered slaves to their instincts and, therefore, react to the circumstances on the basis of knowledge gained through senses.
Philosophic devices:	Concepts and arguments handled as tools to prove or disprove the efficacy of a trend. A word from critical theory. Critics and commentators have always an inkling of which argument or concept (philosophic devices) is going to deliver the goods.
Strategic:	From strategy. Useful in implementing a plan and for a specific purpose.