



Beyond the Text: Marxism and the Social Context of Literary Creation

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Abstract— *This article explores the intersection of Marxist theory and literary creation by examining the social and economic contexts that shape literary works. Building on the foundational Marxist concepts of base and superstructure, class struggle, and ideology, the paper argues that literature cannot be understood in isolation from the material conditions in which it is produced. The article challenges traditional formalist approaches that prioritize the text itself over its external influences, advocating instead for a reading of literature as a product of its socio-economic environment. By analyzing literary works as reflections and critiques of class relations, the paper demonstrates how authors engage with and respond to the social forces around them, consciously or unconsciously reflecting the contradictions of their time. Furthermore, the article interrogates the role of ideology in literature, showing how dominant cultural narratives often serve the interests of the ruling class, while subversive works can reveal the tensions and potential for change within capitalist societies. Drawing on examples from both canonical and contemporary texts, the paper examines how Marxist criticism can uncover the ways in which literature both shapes and is shaped by the material realities of class, power, and production. The article concludes by asserting that a Marxist approach to literary criticism not only illuminates the historical and political forces at play in literary creation but also provides a powerful tool for critiquing the ongoing social inequalities in today's world.*



Keywords— *base, class struggle, social reality, superstructure.*

I. INTRODUCTION

Marxism views various phenomena in society as interconnected parts of a larger social structure. Social reality, according to Marxism, is shaped by the collective thoughts, feelings, and beliefs of individuals. As people engage in production and distribution, there is an ongoing conflict between different social classes—those with power and wealth (the "haves") and those without (the "have-nots")—each group striving to assert or maintain its dominance within the social hierarchy. Marxism asserts that class struggle is the fundamental driving force in any society, and that no aspect of societal life can be fully understood without considering this conflict.

At a higher level, Marxism uses a method of investigation and analysis that is objective, scientific, and superior in its approach—known as the dialectical method. This method views the opposing and conflicting elements of a

phenomenon as interrelated and mutually influential. The structure of society, therefore, is built upon the tension between these two groups.

The survival and evolution of society depend on a productive clash between these conflicting groups, where the resolution of class struggles leads to progress and change. From a dialectical perspective, historical phenomena are both shaped by existing conditions and the result of opposing forces. Marxism places significant emphasis on the concepts of "society" and "social reality," reminding us that society is dynamic and constantly evolving, governed by historical forces like class struggle, state functions, and revolutionary political changes. Ultimately, the resolution of conflicts between social groups contributes to growth and development, and only by seeing these interconnected facts can we fully understand the nature of social reality.

II. OVERVIEW OF MARX'S ESSENTIAL IDEAS: CLASS STRUGGLE, MATERIALISM, AND IDEOLOGY

Class Struggle

Marx posits that society is fundamentally divided into two main groups: the "haves" (those with power and resources) and the "have-nots" (the working class or proletariat). These two groups are locked in constant conflict as they seek to assert or preserve their dominance within the societal framework. Marxism emphasizes that class struggle is inherent in all societies and is essential for societal progress and development. According to Marx, the clash between these groups is not only inevitable but should be productive and positive for the advancement of society. Growth and societal evolution emerge from the resolution of these conflicts. Thus, Marxism assigns significant importance to the concepts of "society" and "social reality," underscoring that these forces shape the way society functions.

III. MATERIALISM AND IDEOLOGY

Dialectical Materialism:

Dialectical materialism is the scientific method developed by Marx to interpret history. Influenced by the French school of materialism, particularly Ludwig Feuerbach, Marx's materialism posits that matter, not ideas, is the ultimate reality. In this view, ideas are reflections of material conditions within society.

Historical Materialism:

Historical materialism is the application of dialectical materialism to the study of history. It offers an economic interpretation of history by applying the Marxian approach of dialectical materialism. According to this perspective, the processes of economic production and distribution are central to societal existence and the structure of social relations. These processes depend on the available resources and how they are utilized within a society. However, these economic factors also influence how people live, think, and interact, as they are guided by cultural norms that shape their beliefs and actions.

For example, two transformative events in Europe—the French Revolution and the Industrial Revolution—illustrate the impact of material conditions on society. The French Revolution, occurring at the end of the 18th century, introduced the idea of equality and challenged the hierarchical structure of society. The uprising against feudal lords sparked revolutionary changes, leading to the establishment of democracy and free enterprise.

In contrast, the Industrial Revolution in England, which took place in the 19th century, transformed the social fabric

by prompting massive migration from rural areas to urban centers in search of work. This shift drastically altered the economic landscape, with urban economies booming while rural economies suffered.

The Industrial Revolution also had a profound impact on literature. Many writers of the time became sympathetic to the plight of the working class, choosing to focus on characters from the lower classes to highlight deep human struggles. In comparison, characters from the upper classes often appeared uninspired and shallow. Literary works from this period reflect a new outlook, one that emphasizes the lived experiences of common people. From a Marxist perspective, literature is not merely myth or fantasy; rather, it serves as a representation of real, material conditions and the struggles that shape human lives. In this way, literature becomes a crystallized expression of the societal forces at play during this time.

IV. MARXIST VIEW ON LITERATURE

The Marxist perspective on literature has had a profound and lasting impact on 20th-century criticism and thought, primarily because of its focus on history and society. According to Marx, history is shaped by human action, with people influencing society based on the resources available to them. It is the collective will of individuals that determines the course of human life within a society. Changes in society, Marx argues, come through class struggle, with the social reality of Marxism asserting that society is always biased in favor of the dominant class. The new productive force—the industrial working class or proletariat—has the potential to alter the societal structure and address its inherent injustices.

From a Marxist viewpoint, the individual is an inseparable part of society, and one cannot hold contradictory views about the society in which they live. However, we often encounter individuals who present multiple perspectives at different times, leading to the emergence of two opposing social groups. These groups come into conflict, with one becoming the dominant class and the other the subordinate class. One strategy used by the dominant group is to encourage the middle class to adopt an "independent" and seemingly objective stance, questioning the validity of both the dominant and subordinate groups' positions. The middle class often believes this stance allows for a more neutral perspective, but in reality, it serves the interests of the dominant group. The ruling class knows that ultimate power rests in its hands, and thus, it doesn't need to worry about middle-class assertions. Marxism asserts that social reality is always biased, and that the proletariat has the potential to change the unjust structure of society.

The concept of “social reality” refers to the social environment specific to a given time, encompassing economic, political, and ideological aspects. This reality reflects the structure within which a limited number of people carry out key activities related to the production and distribution of goods. For Marx, production is the most fundamental aspect of human existence. He believed that what distinguishes humans from animals is their ability to produce their means of subsistence—a process influenced by their physical and social conditions. As humans produce the means of their survival, they are indirectly shaping their material life. Their identity and existence, therefore, are intertwined with what they produce and how they produce it. The nature of individuals is thus determined by the material conditions that govern their production processes.

The owning class and the working class are constantly engaged in shaping society, resulting in ongoing tension between these two groups. Despite the productive nature of enterprises, hostility between the classes persists. Marx argues that human social productivity is inherently progressive—it continually increases and expands, leading to the production of greater quantities of goods and services.

This brings us to the concept of class struggle, which is central to Marxist theory. The two opposing sections of society—those who own the means of production (the bourgeoisie) and those who do not (the proletariat)—are locked in a perpetual conflict. This struggle is a driving force of historical movement and progress, as the distribution of socially produced goods remains deeply unequal. While goods are produced collectively, their distribution is individualistic, benefiting those who own the means of production. According to Marx, the owners appropriate the surplus value generated by the workers, leaving them with only the wages necessary for subsistence. This exploitation of labor, Marx argues, is a key element of capitalist society.

V. BASE AND SUPERSTRUCTURE IN MARXIST THEORY

The concepts of **base** and **superstructure** are central to Marxist thought and play a crucial role in understanding societal change. According to Marx, significant transformations in society often come about through violent upheavals. This is because the ruling class—the owners of wealth, land, and privilege—resist change and are reluctant to relinquish their power for the benefit of the working masses, who Marx saw as the true producers of society’s wealth. The ruling class tends to focus on preserving their own power, enjoying wealth, prestige, and influence, while neglecting the well-being of the laborers who sustain the economy through their daily toil. This inequality and

oppression lead to uprisings and revolutions among the working class against the elite.

For instance, in 17th-century England, the common people’s dissatisfaction with the aristocracy culminated in violent confrontations. This conflict led to the execution of King Charles I and the subsequent exile of his son to France. Though the power of the people did not endure in the long term, the shift that occurred at the base of society was undeniable. The existing social structure was drastically altered: land relations were transformed, and the merchants—who previously had less power—grew in influence, ultimately gaining more control over the direction of Parliament. The political system shifted from a feudal absolutist monarchy to a constitutional monarchy. This represented a fundamental change in the **base**, where the old order was overthrown, giving rise to a new system driven by the common people’s demands for change.

Superstructure and its Transformation

In contrast to the base, the superstructure—which includes the legal, ideological, and cultural institutions of society—experiences change more gradually. According to Marx, while the superstructure follows the changes at the base, it does not necessarily undergo violent shifts. Instead, as the economic base transforms, the superstructure adapts to accommodate the new system. A key example of this transformation is the legal system, which must eventually align with the new economic relations and help legitimize and enforce the new order.

However, the shift in superstructure is not always so straightforward, especially in areas like philosophy, ideology, and culture. Often, people begin to sense the possibility of social change, along with its potential positive and negative effects, before the changes in the base fully materialize. This sense of dissatisfaction and desire for change is often reflected in literature and culture long before it manifests in the political or economic systems. In this way, the superstructure—especially through art, culture, and ideology—can intensify the conflict within the base rather than simply follow its transformation.

The Relationship Between Base and Superstructure

The critical question that arises is how people become conscious of their conditions within the superstructure if the changes in the base come first. In other words, how do individuals become aware of the need to overthrow the old base when that base has become obsolete, and societal change is necessary to unleash the productive forces of humanity?

Marx’s theory clarifies this relationship between base and superstructure. While these components of social reality can be studied in theory in isolation, their true nature can only

be understood in practice, particularly by the **proletariat**, the real producers in society. Marx argued that social reality should no longer be left to the philosophers but should instead be analyzed and shaped by those who truly drive social change—the working class. The interaction between the superstructure (ideas, culture, politics) and the base (economic production) ultimately leads to the evolution of society. It is through the collective consciousness and action of the proletariat that the old structures can be overthrown, and a new social order can emerge.

VI. SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

Marxist literary criticism draws heavily on the political and economic theories of German philosopher Karl Marx, applying his analysis of society to the realm of literature. This approach connects literary texts to the broader social, historical, cultural, and political contexts in which they are produced. Marxist criticism focuses on the ways in which literature not only reflects but also reinforces or challenges the underlying economic and social structures of a society. This perspective has remained influential over time and continues to evolve, with contemporary interpretations branching into fields such as post-colonialism, cultural studies, and other critical approaches that examine power dynamics, identity, and societal change.

At the heart of Marxist literary theory is the idea that literature is deeply intertwined with the material conditions of the time in which it is written. Karl Marx's emphasis on class struggle, materialism, and the economic forces that shape human existence forms the foundation of this critical approach. Marx believed that society is divided into classes, each with its own material interests, and that these divisions create inherent conflicts, which literature can either expose or perpetuate. Marxist literary critics analyze how texts engage with these conflicts, often questioning how literature either reflects or challenges the dominant ideologies of its time. For instance, does a work of literature uphold the values of the ruling class, or does it give voice to the oppressed and marginalized, seeking to expose social inequalities?

Furthermore, Marxist criticism examines how literature functions as a tool of power. It asks how the ideas and narratives presented in literary works may serve to legitimize existing power structures or question their legitimacy. The portrayal of class, labor, and economic systems in literature becomes central to understanding how authors interact with—and potentially critique—the dominant social order. By considering the material conditions under which literary works are produced, Marxist critics reveal the ways in which literature can either sustain or challenge the status quo, highlighting the

importance of ideology in shaping both the content of the text and the societal forces at play.

In this way, Marxist literary theory offers a lens through which we can understand the role of literature as both a product and a reflection of the socio-economic structures that shape our world. It is not merely concerned with what is represented in the text, but also with how those representations engage with issues of power, class, and ideology, ultimately offering insights into the complex interplay between art, culture, and society.

In conclusion, the article emphasizes the profound connection between literature and the socio-economic conditions that shape it. By analyzing literary works through a Marxist lens, we gain insight not only into the text itself but also into the material and historical forces that influence its creation. Marxism reminds us that literature is not produced in a vacuum; it is deeply embedded within a society's class structure, political dynamics, and economic relations. The article underscores that literature both reflects and challenges the power dynamics of its time, serving as a tool through which class struggles, ideologies, and social tensions are explored and often critiqued.

Moreover, it highlights the importance of considering the social reality that informs literary production. By situating literary texts within their historical context, we can better understand how they both shape and are shaped by the society in which they are written. Marxism's focus on the base-superstructure relationship, class conflict, and ideological forces provides a powerful framework for unpacking the complexities of literature and its role in societal transformation.

Ultimately, it argues for a Marxist approach to literary criticism that goes beyond surface-level analysis, advocating for a deeper engagement with the socio-political realities that inform literary creation. Through this lens, literature becomes a vital site for understanding the contradictions, struggles, and potential for change within the broader social order. The article concludes by reaffirming the relevance of Marxism in contemporary literary studies, showing how it continues to offer critical insights into the intersection of art, society, and power.

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