

CHAPTER IV

A Marxist Reading of Mahasweta Devi's *Mother of 1084* and Arundhati

Roy's *The God of Small Things*.

There has been a great ideological shift in the academic world since the publication of Karl Marx's *Communist Manifesto* (1848). His ideas of capitalism and socialism influenced literary discourses greatly. His work had a profound impact on the corporate world which was ruled by bourgeoisie and to whom the proletariats owed their allegiance. He did not favour capitalism as it espoused inequality in terms of material distribution. Karl Marx wanted socialism to replace this discriminating economic system. He stressed upon the importance of arranging an economic system based on equality.

In capitalism, the means of production are owned by private individuals and the use of resources are also controlled by business owners. It also induces investors for its liberal market policy. The focal point of capitalism is to gain maximum profit. The general purpose is to accumulate maximum wealth for the owners of a business firm. The government assumes a very passive role under capitalism by formatting and implementing economic laws for the individuals to increase their material growth.

The bourgeoisie is the superior class which gains their profit from the subsidized products that are produced by the labourers. They take full advantage of the privileges at the cost of the hard labour of the working classes. On the other hand, the proletariats are the working classes who render services to the dominant class. Karl Marx viewed capitalism as a phase that will be gradually replaced by socialism due to its complications. He was a staunch critic of capitalism due to its adherence to the principle of profit making by neglecting the labour class. He formulated his theory of class in order to provide economic reliance to the non-elites. To quote him:

In bourgeoisie society, therefore the past dominates the present; in communist society, the present dominates the past. In bourgeoisie society capital is independent and has individuality, while the living person is dependent and has no individuality (*Communist Manifesto*, 171)

Marx put his views on the political pamphlet which he wrote in conjunction with Friedrich Engels. Since its publication, it has assumed a very important role in determining class relations. Karl Marx continued his critique of political economy in his pioneering theoretical book *Das Kapital* (1867). Here, he propounded his communist ideologies in this seminal work. Here he states that capitalists are the ultimate owners of surplus value. Marxism emphasizes public ownership of the means of production and distribution.

The conflict between classes dates back to the feudal society when the landlords were the owners of the means of production and distribution and the serfs were their workers. Marxist theory calls for a more inclusive literature for giving expression to the unsung misfortunes of the left out millions. Marxism developed a counter attack on the traditional outlook towards disbursement. Though the main argument of Marxism is to revert class struggle, yet Marx himself deviates from this accepted definition and concludes that class struggle always existed.

Raymond Williams (1977) questioned the implications of Marxist theory in providing equal space for the subalterns of class¹. He states that the arguments of Marxism are not sufficient in providing economic independence to the proletariat. He says that Marxist theory should do away with the tradition of 'base-superstructure' in order to be reliant. He attempted to refine Marx's ideologies. His works have rendered eminent service in the understanding of society and culture and foregrounded his theory on cultural materialism.

Instances of class tussle can be found abundantly in the literature of the Victorian times. The Victorian England witnessed the Industrial Revolution which took the whole world under its wing. It originated in the west and took everyone under it. The Industrial Revolution affected the creation of the working classes and their superior classes. It was almost similar to that of the landlord system, where the serfs owed their allegiance to the landowners.

The industries created several classes and classes created hierarchies. It revolutionized the manufacturing world by the introduction of several apparatuses, which galvanized the twentieth century. Almost every section of people came under the influence of the introduction of heavy machineries in the existing industries. And the reflection of this kind of transition in the socio-economic condition is found in the literature of the Victorian times.

The term 'Condition of England' was used by Thomas Carlyle in his notable dissertation titled *Chartism* (1839), where he wanted to highlight the glitches allied with industrialized growth and mechanical expansion. Though the expression was used before Carlyle by Gregory King in his book *Natural and political observations and Conclusions Upon the State and Condition of England* (1801), yet it was applied in the Victorian context for the first time by none other than Carlyle. The term was used to show the bearing of mechanization on the English working classes. He expressed his sympathy for the poor and argued for a more profound reform.

Carlyle contributed towards the awakening of social consciousness among the reading public. He attacked the growing materialism of Victorian society and its laissez-faire doctrine. He believed that economic freedom of England was a delusion as it made workers greater slaves because mechanization hampers human ability to think and act properly. He expressed his sympathy for the poor and claimed for an additional insightful transformation. Carlyle contributed towards the arousal of social cognizance among the interpreting community.

The term 'Condition of England' refers to a body of narrative fiction that deals with the changes brought about by the growth of industry in the Victorian era. Elizabeth Gaskell's first novel, *Mary Barton* (1848) is usually regarded as a classic in this genre. The story revolves around the lives of the Bartons, a working class family and the crisis that results from the involvement of the male head in a murder that is motivated by class difference². The setting of the novel is Manchester city, which was a hub of commerce and industry. Gaskell offered another explanation of this subject in her novel *North and South* (1855).

Another celebrated novelist who practiced this genre is Benjamin Disraeli, who used the background of automation in his novels *Coningsby* (1848) and *Sybil* (1845). The former is a political-romantic novel set in early Victorian era which was concerned with post alteration authenticities, while in the later he comments on Chartism. Two more novels which deal with 'Condition of England' question are *Yeast* (1848) and *Alton Locke* (1850). Both the works offer views from a perspective of reformism.

Victorian literature is replete with numerous works, where we can see the constant struggle of classes for survival. The presence of class struggle can be seen in the works of British novelists like Charles Dickens, George Eliot, Charles Kingsley, Benjamin Disraeli and Mrs. Elizabeth Gaskell. It was in fact started by Charles Darwin's legendary book where

he puts forward his famous theory of survival of the fittest. He argues that those species which have the features to struggle are fit to survive. He states this in his seminal book *Origin of Species*. He developed this theory after years of research in the ocean islands. He came to the conclusion that there is constant struggle between various organisms in order to sustain themselves.

The theory of natural selection by Charles Darwin caused considerable ferment in Victorian England. His ideas had a profound influence on the understanding of human life. Darwin's passion for the natural world was phenomenal. He became a passionate naturalist, eagerly collecting beetles, insects and reading about natural science. He went on the H.M.S. Beagle's scientific expedition with Robert Fitzroy as an unpaid volunteer. His voyage lasted for five years which gave him important insights and changed the course of biological thought forever.

Darwin's experience in the Galapagos Island made him realize that the process of evolution is very complex and the theories were not passable to elucidate it. Eventually, he came up with his theory of evolution which states that all the organisms arise and develop through natural selection of small, inbred variations that increase the individual's ability to compete, survive and reproduce. He also came up with the idea of 'survival of the fittest' which means those species which successfully transmit their traits to the coming generations are the most suitable to endure the pangs of this world.

Darwin published his verdicts in a book which came to be known as *On the Origin of Species* on November 24, 1859. The book created an uproar among the churchmen who were the first to respond to his theory as it had no room for divine interference. The theory was criticized for its exclusion of divine philosophy. Darwin's theory trembled the traditional Victorian world of English people and they were divided into two slices. One part believed in the Darwinian Theory while the other segment had full faith on the divine creation. His discovery later influenced several biological expeditions which proved his theory to be correct.

Charles Dickens in his pioneer work, *Great Expectations*(1842) shows the class divide and how the dominant class exerts control over the weaker section of society. Here, Miss Havisham was the patron of Pip and Estella, hence she used them to her pleasure. Pip belonged to a working class family, his brother-in-law being a blacksmith. Pip lived with his

sister's family after the death of his parents. The fact that he felt ashamed over the job status of Joe shows the traditional mindset of people towards workers.

In the novel, Dickens shows Pip's gradual movement from a small boy to an adult and the difficulties that he encounters during the journey. Though he had a secret benefactor in a convict whom Pip saved once, yet it was the general belief that Miss Havisham was the helper owing to her riches. Dickens shows the intricacies of the protagonist's relationship with his patron.

In *Hard Times* (2004) also Dickens makes a parody of the socio-economic state of contemporary England. The novel portrays the various classes prevalent in the Victorian set-up. Dickens draws a realistic picture of the capitalist economy that penetrated deep down the Victorian world. The ins and outs of the industrial world has been articulated in black and white by the renowned novelist, Dickens.

The industrial revolution galvanized the whole world into a manufacturing unit, where people belonging to different sections were involved. It was a change from the traditional way of manufacturing to optimum use of machines in the industries like dockyards, textile industry, agricultural sector, railways etc. It led to a huge transformation in the way people were engaged in handicraft previously.

The scientific discoveries and inventions galvanized the industrial world greatly. It affected people from every section of society. The beneficiaries were the upper and middle classes, which enjoyed the cream, while the working classes were the deprived lots. They did not enjoy any privilege and were subject to deplorable way of life.

They lived in unhealthy conditions, suffered from malnutrition, subject to sanitation related problems and on top of that their children did not enjoy their childhood. Many minors were engaged in the factories whereas some others became chimney sweepers. The plight of the chimney sweepers is seen in the writings of Charles Lamb, the great Romantic essayist. He has recorded every minute detail of the plight of young lads, who became victims of industrialization.

In the novel, Dickens attacks the materialist mindset of the modern world. It critiques the inequalities that was the order of the day among the various classes. Dickens dreamt of a socialist world with equal opportunities for everyone. Marxism is defined as a pattern of

socio-economic ideology that commands social change in favour of the non-elites. Marxists always aim at making the world a better place for the subalterns.

Marxist theory challenges the traditional social structure. That played a main part in accentuating the aspirations of the lower classes. In *Hard Times*, Dickens directed all his artistic energy in upholding a picture of the Victorian society, where times were difficult for the masses with low wages, little food and criminology.

The class divide is found abundantly in Roy's novel, *The God of Small Things*. The futility of the tenets of Marxist theory of the leftist states of India is awe-inspiring. There is a huge gap between theory and practice of Marxist philosophy, which supports the proletariat. But in reality it is the bourgeoisie society which gets the cream of everything. They enjoy every bit of life while the proletariat's sufferings know no end.

The working class always remains subservient to their employing authorities and hardly challenge social hierarchy. In spite of all the tenets of Marxism that speak for the cause of the subaltern class, there are people who violate them at every phase. Their socio-economic status forces them to accept allegiance to their social superiors. Such type of hypocritical stand is found in Roy's novel.

In her novel, Roy takes the Marxist state of Kerala as its setting and lays bare the double standard attitude of Marxists. The Ayemenem people were mostly Syrian Christians, who supported the Congress party as Marxist party was equal to death for them. Ironically, the leftist government never challenged the conventions of a capitalist society when it came to power. Though Marxism was a philosophy of change, yet its Ayemenem practitioners never really valued its ideologies.

The real secret was that communism crept into Kerala insidiously. As a reformist movement that never overtly questioned the traditional values of a caste-ridden, extremely traditional community. The Marxists worked from within the communal divides, never challenging them, never appearing not to. They offered a cocktail revolution. A heady mix of Eastern Marxism and Orthodox Hinduism, spiked with a shot of democracy. (66-67)

Though Chacko, was an aristocrat, yet he was a practicing Marxist. He wholeheartedly supported the Communist party, which came to power in Kerala only to be criticized for its bloody reformist ideology. In fact Pappachi provided him various information relating to riots, strikes and increase of the brutal behavior of the police authorities, which ensured the derailment of the Marxist government from its track.

The parliament was soon dissolved because of its ruthless policies, only to be re-elected ten years later as part of a coalition government between Communist Party of India and Communist Party of India (Marxist). Their wayward ways included violent land reforms, subvert the law-enforcing people, controlling the judiciary and subsidizing the opposition Congress Party.

The violent attitude adopted by the radical members of Communist Party of India (Marxist), including the Naxalites of West Bengal accentuated throughout the nation. In the North side in Palghat, a landlord's beheaded body was found tied to a lamp post. This created ripples in the minds of the feudal lords of Kerala. The government was forced to expel the hardcore revolutionaries for the sake of maintaining power.

The Marxist government of Kerala finally concentrated on upholding the policies by writing a petition to increase the wages of women labourers from two rupees twenty five paise to three rupees per day and men's from two rupees to four rupees per day. "They were also demanding that the untouchables will no longer be addressed by their caste names. They demanded not to be addressed as Achoo Parayan, or Kelan Pravan, or Kuttan Pulayan, but just as Achoo, or Kelan, or Kuttan." (69) They manifested the so called Marxist ideologies only after their disastrous run at office due to non-performance. Power corrupted them and they could not hold on to the theories pleading which they formed the government.

The Marxists men, one fine day including students and party volunteer's flag marched Ayemenem, Chanting revolutionary slogans. Velutha, being a Paravan was a participating member of the rally was recognized by Rahel. Still he used to abide by the stringent rules of the Ayemenem society and carried out the duties assigned to him as an outcast. Their resolute attitude made Baby Kochamma afraid of them. Chacko, in spite of being a member of the aristocratic Ayemenem family, followed the tenets of Marxism. He supported the Marxist government of Kerala wholeheartedly.

Likewise, Brati of Mahasweta Devi's *Mother of 1084* was also a member of highborn family but followed the path of revolution owing to his affiliation to Marxist ideologies. He

followed the leaders of Naxal movement and formed a group of his own to challenge prevalent socio-political malpractices. He chose the path of revolution in order to bring transformation on society.

His selfless enterprise can be contrasted with Chacko, who draws flak from the critics because of his attitude towards female employees of his mother's pickle-making factory. He used to have physical relationship with the factory workers and Mammachi commissioned a special room for him where he quenched his physical thirst. This is in stark contrast to the Marxist ideologies which emphasizes the emancipation of the working community.

In the novel, comrade K.N.M.Pillai is a stern Marxist leader whose party came to power by upholding the ideologies of Marx and Lenin. But when Chacko visits him in order to discuss regarding Velutha's position in the pickle factor, he chose to retain his class identity and resented the inclusion of a Paravan in the food factory. After receiving complaints from fellow workers, Pillai explained to Chacko the importance of caste system. When Velutha was praised by Chacko for his skills as a carpenter, Pillai said that others at the factory were unhappy about it:

They see it as a partiality. After all, whatever job he does carpenter or electrician or whatever it is, for them he is just a Paravan. It is a conditioning they have from birth. This I myself have told is wrong. But frankly speaking, Comrade. Change is one thing. Acceptance is another. You should be cautious. Better for him you send him off.(279)

This statement of Pillai stands in stark contrast to the wall hanging in the room which reads "work is struggle, struggle is work" (268). The hypocrisy of politicians can be seen when Pillai speaks about providing equal opportunity to everyone in election rallies. He was upholding the characteristics of Marxist philosophy in order to garner votes. But as soon as he gained position, he had a change of mind and showed his true colors.

In *Mother of 1084*, we get a real hero who laid down his life for his Marxist ideologies. The story is set in West Bengal, when it was under the grip of Naxal uprising. Bengal, at that time was going through turbulent times when the Naxalites torched the upper class households. It tells the story of Sujata's son Brati, who held on to the principles of Marx. He wanted a just society where everybody would be treated equally. Many people told his

different ways of living would lead to complicated situation but he did not pay heed to any such comments. But his sacrifice also could not change the existing situation.

Happy and peaceful households are back. Rice is hoarded freely again and sold freely in the blackmarket. The cinemas draw crowds day and night. People throng temples where godmen reign, seeking salvation. The killers of yesteryears have changed their garb and move about freely in their new identities. A chapter has ended. A new chapter of the great saga has begun. (34)

Brati was even against his father who was a staunch aristocrat. Brati could not stand the hypocrite nature of his father's class and that is why he revolted against it. He never compromised with the values for which he laid down his life. Brati was a staunch revolutionary, who made every possible effort to instill equality in the society. When confronted by his mother regarding his treatment of his father, he says that he never considered him as his enemy. He said that :

All the things and values he holds on to. There are many others who swear by the same things and values. The class that nurtures these values, we consider it our enemy. He belongs to that class. (16)

It shows that even his aristocratic upbringing also could not make him one among them. Brati's father was an upper class hypocrite and for him maintaining status was everything. He was not perturbed by his son's death, rather he was concerned about his own image. He made every effort so that his image is not tarnished if his son's name appear in the newspapers with the other 1083 names. Brati's association with the Naxalite movement would have affected his status in society and that is why he made sure that his name did not feature in that list. He even ordered his picture to be removed from the wall.

Thus it is seen that the distinction between people on the basis of class has been existent throughout. It has remained a major tool of determining the potential of an individual. The society is not based on terms of equality and that finds reflection in the works of Mahasweta Devi and Arundhati Roy. It has been seen that though there is a general trend of following the tenants of Marxism in the left ruled states, yet the study has discovered a gross violation of its norms.

There has been a major break between theory and practice of Marxist policies. The theorists have rendered irrevocable services in placing petitions for the marginalized class in their academic works. A study of the major works of the two writers reveal the fact that not much have been applied in reality. They remain major explorers of subaltern consciousness and have made every possible effort in salvaging the status of the proletariats in the society. They try to protect the honour of the downtrodden members of the nation.

The writers are well-equipped to form an artistic realm for the proletariats of their immediate world. They are concerned about the discrepancies that are predominant in the contemporary society. Their works have engendered much curiosity in the academic world for empathizing the subalterns. Both Mahasweta Devi and Arundhati Roy suggest transgression of boundaries in accommodating issues of the weaker section in the literary works of the world.

Notes

1. Williams, Raymond. *Marxism and Literature*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1977. Print.
2. Choudhury, Bibhash. *English Social and Cultural History: An Introductory Guide and Glossary*. Guwahati: Papyrus, 2008.

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