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CULTURAL MATERIALISM – POSTMODERN ENGLISH LITERATURE

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Abstract

Marxism was a social, political, and economic theory originated by Karl Marx, which focused on the struggle between capitalists and the working class. Marx wrote that the power relationships between capitalists and workers were inherently exploitative and would inevitably create class conflict. He believed that this conflict would ultimately lead to a revolution in which the working class would overthrow the capitalist class and seize control of the economy. This was the most popular theory of nineteenth-century but Raymond Williams, one of the most influential critics of Karl Marx, realized that Marxism needs to be revised. Therefore, Raymond Williams worked on Marxism and developed it and presented his own theory called Cultural Materialism. Williams was of the view that culture is the "whole way of life." Capitalism that has materialized everything, has affected culture and the existing ideology of culture is expressed in the literature using the support of the language of that particular region. A literary work is written in the reflection of that particular era because it explains the growth and development of a social and ethnic group based on certain beliefs. In a society, people interact and show different attitudes and behaviors. These attitudes and behaviors demonstrate their culture. The language of any social setting is used to produce literature which in a particular era, and ideologies presented in a piece of literature are associated with culture. The knowledge and understanding of these elements are essential for the interpretation of a literary work. Raymond Williams, in his theory of Cultural Materialism, emphasized the importance of each of these elements. To validate the thoughts of William two novels written by postmodern authors titled Tess of d'Urbervilles – A Pure Woman by Thomas Hardy and Great Expectations by Charles Dickens were selected. Both the authors have the beliefs, attitude, and behavior which represent the culture of that era. The events shared the books fully verify the thoughts of Raymond William.

Keywords: Cultural Materialism, Postmodern English Literature

Introduction

Raymond Williams (1921-1988) is one of the most influential critics of Marxism and his book, *Marxism and Literature* (1977) marks a major development in his work. He has divided his book into three parts. In the first part, he talks about culture, language, literature, and ideology. According to him:

"Firstly, the idea of *culture*, offering a different sense of human growth and development, and, second, the idea of *socialism*, offering a social and historical criticism of an alternative to 'civilization' and 'civil society' as fixed and achieved conditions." (page 14) *Marxism* entered the scene at this point, arguing both that capitalism constituted only one way of life among others, thus able to be superseded by socialism, and that "Civilization had produced not only wealth, order, and refinement, but as part of the same process poverty, disorder, and degradation." (page 18) *Marxism* for Williams has a place to conceptualize language, taking its orientation from the insights in social science that language (a) is an activity, and (b) has a history. Thus, Williams opposes his understanding of language to a vestige of linguistic idealism, and structuralism. Structuralism is a key starting point for Williams because a variant of Marxism has attempted to synthesize itself with French structuralism, and he wishes to differentiate himself from this particular strain of Marxism. Williams' criticism of structuralism is, in brief, that it gives temporal priority to a system of values (in the Saussurian sense) over empirical "utterances," which are considered derivative from the structure of a language. For Williams, this relationship between structure and utterance embodies a political relationship between observer and observed, "where the 'language-habits' studied, over a range of speech of conquered and dominated people to the 'dialects' of outlying or socially inferior groups, theoretically matched against the observer's 'standard', were regarded as at most 'behavior', rather than independent, creative, self-directing life (page 27)." Literature, as a concept, has been debased by almost complete abstraction from its conditions of production, to the point of being identified with works expressing immediate lived

experience (page 46)." Literature, like the concepts of society, economy, and culture, changed in meaning with the coming of capitalism. Literary *criticism* also became professionalized at this point, as the "conscious exercise of 'taste', 'sensitivity', and 'discrimination'". It became a significant special form of the general tendency in the concept of literature towards an emphasis on the use or (conspicuous) *consumption* of works, rather than on their production (page 49)." *Ideology* for Williams is an inherently problematic concept, which he thinks requires radical revision. He outlines three meanings the concept has had in Marxist theory:

- a system of beliefs characteristic of a particular class or group;
- a system of illusory beliefs – false ideas or false consciousness – which can be contrasted with true or scientific knowledge;
- The general process of the production of meanings and ideas.

To check the validity of thoughts expressed by Raymond Williams, in his book, *Marxism and Literature*, two of the books from postmodern writers were selected i.e. *Tess of d'Urbervilles* – A Pure Woman by Thomas Hardy and *Great Expectations* by Charles Dickens. The events shared by both of the writers in their books fully verify the thoughts of Raymond Williams which he had named Cultural Materialism.

Discussion

As Raymond says culture is the result of socialism, means this is not only human nature but nature of all living beings that they cannot live alone, they like to live together so to help each in thick and thin of life and to give and take opportunities of growth and development. At the same time, he says that capitalism has damaged the concept of socialism as rich people started collecting wealth for themselves by snatching opportunities from the weak members of the society resulting in discrimination.

In his masterpiece, *Tess of d'Urbervilles*, Hardy exposed the capitalist culture of the Victorian age. The book is the fierce condemnation of the social, economic, ethical and moral values of the contemporary culture of England. According to traditional moral standards, *Tess* is a fallen woman but Hardy subtitles his novel as "A Pure Woman." This indicates that it is cultural criticism of Victorian society in England that had suffered badly because of the rise of capitalism. *Tess*, a simple peasant girl, gets exposed to a capitalist society where she was oppressed physically, psychologically, politically and economically. When her family was suffering economically badly, she decided to go out to work so that she could earn to support her family. These were her needs that made her struggle and in her struggle, she met Alec, the son of a capitalist who exercised his financial influence on her. As he was rich and powerful, he continued to exploit her. He harmed her and destroyed her. *Tess's* struggle with Alec can be viewed as the struggle of the poor working class with a socially rich and powerful aristocrat. The same can be viewed as the struggle of genders in which male members are advantaged and women were disadvantaged. Widdowson describes how Hardy's fiction, including *Tess*, has been analyzed by "socialist-feminist, materialist-poststructuralist, or feminist-poststructuralist approaches." Widdowson explains, "What they all have in common, however, is a cultural politics which seeks to subvert the orthodox "Hardy" and to (re)mobilize the "disproportioning" dimension of his work." Boumelha writes about "the components of *Tess's* complex class-position (decayed aristocratic lineage, economic membership of the newly-forming rural proletariat, modified by an education that provides her with a degree of access to the culture of the bourgeoisie." She emphasizes that within *Tess*, Hardy is depicting "the fact that sexual and marital relationships are presented in such direct relation to economic pressures and to work."

According to Raymond, language is an activity having its history, further, it gives temporal priority to a system of values over empirical utterances, which are considered derivative from structure of language, moreover, he says, meanings of culture are changed with the coming of capitalization, it has

become the conscious exercise of taste, sensibility, and discrimination. The literary writings of Hardy and Dickens verify the ideas of Williams about language. As language is a purely human quality and knowledge of the language is very important for the interpretation of any text. As per Raymond, language can be used to construct and reconstruct the thought and the world around us for development. Language, in a social setting, is used to influence others and show power.

In *Great Expectations*, Pip was oppressed physically and mentally because he was poor, immature and powerless. Dickens has used various metaphors that help us in our analysis to understand the social mindsets of that time. As Pip was not educated, he was despised as immature and uncivilized. Dickens has associated various animal metaphors with him. He is called a "young dog" by Magwitch (page 4) and a "young monkey" (page 9) by Mrs. Joe and is treated as if he were "a dog in disgrace" (page 62) by Estella. He is subject to other people's rules and exploitation because of his immaturity just as the colonial subject is in the colony. Like Pip, Joe also went through the same treatment as it is mentioned through a statement in the novel in which he said; "I don't deny that your sister comes to the Mo-gul over us" (page 49). "Mo-gul" is, therefore, a metaphor of the absolute power that Mrs. Joe exercises over Joe and Pip, who are considered too immature to govern themselves. Pip is not allowed to maintain sovereignty "over himself, over his own body and mind" (*On Liberty* 69), being deprived of his own free will or even the free use of his limbs, as he recounts: "Even when I was taken to have a new suit of clothes, the tailor had orders to make them like a kind of Reformatory, and on no account to let me have the free use of my limbs" (23). Besides Mrs. Joe, Miss Havisham and Estella also oppressed Pip because of class differences. They would degrade him though Pip had lots of expectations with Miss. Havisham and he was in love with Estella. Miss Havisham did not help him to educate himself and come out to be a respectable member of society. That's why they did not let them get educated and be a "gentleman" rather they tried to make him aware that he was just "a common

laboring-boy" (page 60) with coarse hands and thick boots.

Literature is the mirror of society as it highlights social, political and economic changes. It is a record of all the historical changes that take place in a particular time period that's why literature or a literary work is called the product of the age when it is written. According to Raymond, "periods of major transition between social systems are commonly marked by the emergence of radically new forms" of literature.

The rise and growth of capitalism, in the Victorian era, changed the social, political and economic scenario of England. Before this, the society was comprised of two social groups; upper class and poor class. The industrial revolution brought about drastic changes in all spheres of life. This marvelous revolution opened the doors to new opportunities for the people. The rich people started investing their money to generate revenue. They need the services of a skilled worker who could work for them. The people from the working class who wanted to have a respectable position and their own identity started availing the job opportunities. This group emerged out as a "middle class" as a new social class. While "peasantry" who knew nothing other than farming was the outcast, poor working class. Thomas Hardy and Charles Dickens, in their literary works, have mentioned this drastic change.

Tess of d'Urbervilles is presented by Hardy as "a simple peasant girl" whose family had suffered badly after the industrial revolution. Her exploitation and destruction at the hands of aristocratic Alec are "the destruction of the peasantry." She is the victim of all injustices and oppression.

In his masterpiece, *Great Expectations*, Dickens presented "Pip" as the representative of the outcast poor class who was condemned as the most unwanted and disliked. The growth of capitalism also gave rise to new forms of literature like novels, literary, social and cultural criticism. Because of the advancement of transportation, the rich who had plenty of money began to set out for far-flung countries to know the culture of different geographical lands. They would write their

experiences that would be printed in the form of narration (novels). Tess of d'Urbervilles is a comprehensive cultural criticism of the Victorian age that can be read to know the social and cultural values of that time. Hardy has provided a detailed account of the social and cultural changes that took place in Victorian England after the rise of capitalism. The emergence of the middle class, the tragic state of working-class, and arrogance of upper class and the exploitation of working-class at the hands of the rich, oppression, injustice, corruption and class conflicts all have been highlighted.

Charles Dickens, the best representative of his age, provided the social criticism of the Victorian age. In *Great Expectations*, Charles Dickens presents how extreme poverty was because of the rise of capitalism, which made people suffered. He highlighted the pride, arrogance and disgusting selfish attitudes of the upper class through his characters; Miss Havisham and Estella. The class struggle of working-class through the protagonist, Pip. The plot of *Great Expectations* centers on how a boy of working-class origin becomes a "gentleman." The inclusion of the working-class protagonist in the category of a gentleman, which represented "a cultural goal, a mirror of desirable moral and social values" (Gilmore 1) in Victorian England, indicates an ideological shift in the construction of English identity in Dickens's novels.

According to Raymond, ideology is an inherently problematic concept which needs radical revision. He, in his book *Marxism and Literature*, writes ideology as 'a system of beliefs characteristic of a particular class or group, a system of illusory beliefs – false ideas or false consciousness – which can be contrasted with true or scientific knowledge and the general process of the production of meanings and ideas. In a society people living together share a set of beliefs that identify their class like working-class people, middle-class people, and rich class people. Furthermore, the social, political and economic system of any community or society is based on an ideology. Members of society interact with one other in a system for their survival. They continue their struggle of life and in the course of their struggle, they interact with other members like co-workers, employers, etc. In a capitalist society,

the rich make the poor work for them, they maintain their own rules and policies for their employees. Mostly, they exploit the weak and poor workers as they are interested in maximum profit. Charles Dickens and Thomas Hardy have depicted these social aspects in their literary works. The events of the selected literary pieces of both the writers are discussed as under:

Tess was treated with discrimination throughout the story because of Victorian ideologies. According to Victorian standards of morality and religion, a woman who has some sex relation without marriage is considered as "a fallen woman" regardless of any consideration. Furthermore, Victorian society was dominated by patriarchy in which men used to dominate women. Women would suffer because of the "faults not of their own." The poverty-stricken girl was forced to accept the job of rearing fowls in the garden of d'Urbervilles. Her greedy parents made her mind go to work and make fortune for them and she accepted to work so that she could be of some help for her family. With pure intentions, she agreed to do what her parents said and went to d'Urbervilles' mansion. There, she was continuously tortured by her master, Alec who later on exploited her to satisfy his lust. He destroyed her and left her pregnant. After this ruin, she came back to her parents who blamed her without considering the fault of Alec. She went to church that dismissed her as "a fallen woman" and she was left all alone to suffer. In the light of Raymond's concept of ideology as "a system of beliefs characteristic of a particular class or group," Tess was the victim of the system that was based on beliefs of the capitalist and rich class. In 1954, Marxist critic Arnold Kettle argued that although "the subject of *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* is stated clearly by Hardy to be the fate of a 'pure woman'; in fact, it is the destruction of the English peasantry."

In society, some social groups exercise their own influence that is based on "false ideas of false consciousness" that are "contrasted with true or scientific knowledge." These are rich and powerful people who enjoy different good lifestyles because they have money and not questioned for their actions. On the contrary, the poor are kept

suppressed and deprived because of weak financial status. In the selected books of Charles Dickens and Thomas Hardy, there are verifications of Raymond's conception of ideology. The events of the selected literary pieces of both the writers are discussed as under:

Various incidents in the novel, *Tess of d'Urbervilles*, indicate how illusory beliefs on part of rich and influential people in society affect the people of the proletariat and the poor class. Alec kept on exploiting Tess because of false beliefs that if you have money he can do whatever you want. He treated her very badly and harmed her socially, morally and economically. After he raped her, he sent a horse to her father thinking he had paid for his act. He had no sense of guilt for his sin. As Ian Gregor has observed, "Alec's world, the world of the Stoke-D'Urbervilles, is inseparable from nineteenth-century laissez-faire capitalism, it is the triumph of the individual bourgeois ethic, what is wanted can be bought." This incident validates Raymond's concept of ideology as "a system of illusory beliefs" that are "contrasted with true or scientific knowledge." Later in the novel, Tess was in a very pathetic condition. Alec took advantage of her misery and offer her to marry him and he would help out her family with his money. He was obsessed with false and misleading notions that money can buy anything even human beings and there will. As he spoke to Tess; "Remember, my lady, I was your master once! I will be your master again" (page: 336). The statement indicates how in the capitalist world human beings are objectified and marginalized. The rich exercise their own influence in other words ideologies and they are not questioned for their actions. Ideology or ideologies of a group of people in society shape the thought-pattern of people. People's reactions, views, choice of words, etc are too great extend are guided by the ideologies they hold. The capitalist Victorians had their own meanings and ideas about money, power, social status, etc. For them wealth was priority and poverty was a nuisance. Karl Marx's belief that "[w]ith the increasing value of the world of things proceeds in direct proportion the devaluation of the world of men." Mr. Stoke d'Urbervilles, Alec's father, had taught his son that money is the symbol of

respect and honor. If you are rich, you are noble and respectable. Social status is measured according to the financial status of a person and wealth is valued more than human beings. Mrs. Stoke d'Urbervilles used to keep birds not because she used to love them. Rather, it was her hatred for human beings especially village people. Her action could be taken as a manifestation of her hatred for the helpless poor and weak who were not worthy of any fair treatment and should be controlled and restricted like wild birds in a cage. Commenting on the gap between the rich and the poor, Nancy Stepan wrote; "it was considered that "the incorrect mingling of classes, or ethnic groups, would produce a social chaos that would break the traditional boundaries between groups", and the aversion to "impurity of blood" was reactively transformed into the drive to marginalize the lower classes and draw the line of demarcation between "them" and "us." Victorians had their own standards of morality and judgment that are validated through different incidents in the selected novels. Angle Clare, for example, can be taken as a good example in this regard. He married Tess and after marriage, when he knew her ugly past that was mutilated by Alec, he condemned her as "immoral" and decided to abandon her. Though Angel had had an affair with a lady, he treated Tess as per traditional Victorian standards of morality and judgment. He left her escaping all his responsibilities to suffer for the sin that "was not her own." As she writes to Angel; "You know that I did not intend to wrong you - why have you so wronged me? You are cruel, cruel indeed! ... It is all the injustice I have received at your hands!" (455) This is obvious from the incident that the biased laws that are made on the basis of personal ideologies of dominated groups of people affect the weak and poor badly. As Victorian society was male-dominated and gender-biased Tess was treated cruelly while Angle left her as a privileged authority.

Conclusion

Culture i.e., "the whole way of life" is highly influenced by the growth of capitalism. In society, different people interact with one another for their survival. The relation of different social groups determines their social standard and economic status. Language, the medium of communication,

different social groups use to express and communicate also influences culture. Economically and politically powerful people use language to dominate the weak. Literature is the product of an age that gives a complete picture of the age like social, political and economic scenarios. Culture influences mindset or ideology that is as per Raymond, 'a system of beliefs characteristic of a particular class or group, a system of illusory beliefs – false ideas or false consciousness – which can be contrasted with true or scientific knowledge and the general process of the production of meanings and ideas.

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