Paper-2 Module-32

Marxist / Socialist Feminism.

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(B) Description of Module

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<td>Pre-requisites</td>
<td>Students should be familiar with concepts like patriarchy, sexism, gender.</td>
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<td>Objectives</td>
<td>To familiarize the student with the history of Marxist/ Socialist feminism</td>
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Marxist / Socialist Feminism.

Introduction

Marxism, Communism, Socialism and Feminism

The words Marxism and Socialism are not interchangeable but both, as also the word communism, derive their ideas from the pioneering work of Karl Marx. As a philosophy and system of ideas, Marxism has a materialist conception of the world and history. In simple terms, it means that Marxism does not believe in an after-life, in the spiritual sphere or in any explanation of the world which has no basis in materialism. Marxism is concerned with this world. It is concerned with the matter and not ideas as the basis for explanations of this world. All explanations of human nature as god-given or a reference to pre-ordained laws of the universe are rejected by Marxism. This will have important implications for feminist theory as it has to counter many ‘god-given’ or ‘scriptural’ explanations of the nature of man and woman. There is also a political side of these concepts as a number of European countries like France, Italy and Britain have mixed economies where socialist ideas inform their economy. The word socialist is also an integral part of the preamble of the constitution of India. Both the terms Marxist and Socialist when used with feminism define a specific kind of feminism.

It will be proper to use the word feminism in the plural: feminisms rather than feminism. The reason is that there is a considerable degree of difference within the ranks of the feminists. It is true that most feminists concern themselves with the issue of gender and the subordination of women in society, the manner in which they engage with these subjects distinguish them from each other. Feminists using ideas from linguistics, psychology, anthropology, and the more recent work in the field of semiotics and deconstruction approach their subject using different methodologies and focusing on different entities.

There is a very strong tradition of Marxist/socialist scholarship within feminism. A reading of Marxism and feminism suggests that they share some common ground. They both follow a model of society where conflict and tension between two classes is their prime focus. In feminism men and women are those two
broad classes and in Marxism the haves and the have nots, or bourgeoisie and the proletariat, to use the Marxist terminology. Both concern themselves with the issue of power and the subordination of some classes in society. Men have traditionally enjoyed power over women in all known societies resulting in women’s subordination and inferior status. In the case of Marxism, those classes which control the forces of production have enjoyed power over those who have no control over the forces of production, distribution and exchange. Both Marxism and feminism are not satisfied with the existing state of affairs and change is their most important concern. Marxism visualizes a classless society where all dependent classes have been liberated. It strives for the stage of communism and socialism is just a mid point in this ideal. Feminism is probably even more interested in the concept of change. It visualizes a stage where all discrimination on the basis of gender has disappeared and there are not only equal opportunities for women but a complete equality of sexes. Both Marxism and feminism activists focus more on making people aware of their rights, bringing more and more people in their fold, organizing protests and demonstrations and seeking legal and political safeguards

The question relating to women was discussed by Friedrich Engels in his book, *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* (1884) In fact, Marxism does not make a separate case for the exploitation of women. Women are part of the depressed classes who will be liberated once the capitalist system, Marx’s prime target, is overthrown.

Economic determinism is a very important concept in Marxism. Literally this means, that economy determines the nature of most things in society. The concept rests on the belief that society has an economic base and a superstructure. Superstructure consists of world of ideas which may include religion, art and literature. In other words in classical Marxist theory, economy, rather than patriarchy, is the key factor. As patriarchy is the prime target of attack in the work of most feminist theorists they are not comfortable with so much emphasis given to economy in Marxist theory. Obviously many feminists find the exclusion of women in this scheme problematic. Whereas traditional Marxist scholars believe that with the overthrow of capitalism women would be liberated,
those who consider patriarchy as the main culprit in the exploitation of women do not appear too hopeful. In traditional Marxist account capitalism, and in the traditional feminist account, patriarchy is the target.

**Dual Systems Theory**

Some feminist thinkers have sought a marriage of Marxism and feminism. Marxist and Socialist feminists, as they are called, try to fill up the empty spaces in Marxism by supplying ideas from feminism. In their view classical Marxism is ‘sex blind’. The proponents of the Dual Systems Theory, as this theory is called, believe that patriarchy should be given as much importance in any analysis of women’s issues as capitalism. They are of the firm opinion that patriarchal relations form a system of their own which has a separate and distinct from. It stands independently of economic relations discussed in traditional Marxism. Patriarchy has existed prior to capitalism and ‘the two systems interpenetrate each other’. Juliet Mitchell and Nancy Hartman are the main proponents of the Dual Systems Theory but they differ in their account of patriarchy. Iris Young is of the view that Juliet Mitchell’s account of patriarchy is expressed in universal and non-historical terms and it dehistoricizes women’s oppression. Hartman, on the contrary, Young writes, ”emphasizes that patriarchy has a material base in the structure of concrete relations and maintains that the system of patriarchy itself undergoes historical transformation (47).” It is clear here that unlike many schools of criticism which consider patriarchy as a psychological and cultural phenomenon, Hartman emphasizes the material base of patriarchy.

Capitalism and patriarchy both may have a material base, but, as Hartman emphasizes, they are ‘interlocking sets of social relations’. It is the task before literary critics to discover the instances of interlocking between capitalism and patriarchy in works of literature. M.K. Ruthvan(1984) rightly says that “it should not be a matter of privileging class over gender or vice versa, but of engaging in the much more difficult task of showing how and where such ‘interlockings’ occur”(28). Commenting on London based Marxist-Feminist Literature Collective’s reading of *Shirley* Ruthvan writes that “a more coherent Marxist-feminist reading... would interlock a spoken feminism with an unspoken Chartism and see
them both as constitutive elements of the social formation in which Shirley first appeared (29).” By spoken feminism is meant a feminism which is clearly articulated whereas unspoken Chartism (a workers’ movement for reform in England from 1838 to 1858) refers to ideas which are not as clearly stated but are nevertheless part of the assumptions in the text. It may be recalled that Marxist critic Terry Eagleton talked about Chartism as the main theme of Shirley and Helen Taylor, a feminist critic, disagreeing with Eagleton, believed that the ‘plight of dependent women’ was the main subject of this novel.

The Marxist-feminist insight of looking for the unholy alliance of capitalism and patriarchy can be extended to other works as well with minor adjustments. Thus Attia Hosain’s novel Sunlight on a Broken Column and Arundhati Roy’s The God of Small Things can be read from this point of view. In Hosain’s work there is an unmistakable case of ‘interlocking’ between patriarchy and the jagirdari system prevalent in Oudh before the partition of India and in Roy’s novel there is an unholy alliance between caste system and patriarchy.

**Liberal Humanists vs Socialist Feminists:**

In the liberal humanist tradition of feminism there is greater focus on the psychosexual aspect of experience whereas in the socialist tradition, social oppression is more important. In an interesting essay titled “Pandora’s Box: Subjectivity, Class and Sexuality in Socialist Feminist Criticism” (1985) Cora Kaplan notes that “a fierce and unresolved debate continues {within feminism} about the value of using psychoanalytic theory, because of the supposedly ahistorical character of its paradigms(151).” Psychic life is not considered very important in socialist feminism and it tries to “socialize what it can of its psychic portions.” This becomes especially important in the study of literary works which often talk about the psychic aspects of life. One can think of any number of novels, poems and plays which delve deep into the inner life characters. Many of these works probe the feelings and emotions of women. Women’ anger, anguish, fear, anxiety and such emotions are explained as problems of social and political nature by socialist feminists. In the feminist version of liberal humanist criticism, on the other hand, “the possibility of a unified self and an integrated consciousness that
can transcend material circumstance is represented as the fulfillment of desire, the happy closure at the end of the story (Kaplan, 1985: 152). "Reading the work of Mary Wollstonecraft, Rousseau and Virginia Woolf, she pays special attention to socialist feminists’ response to fantasy and desire. Thus Mary Wollstonecraft considered desire, fantasy and sensuality as being inimical to women. Disagreeing with his mentor Rousseau, who ascribed women’s sensuality to nature, she considered culture as responsible for forming their sensuality. However, looking at her work now, as Kaplan notes, “what is disturbingly peculiar to A Vindication of the Rights of Woman (1792) is the undifferentiated and central place that sexuality as passion plays in the corruption (157).”

**Ideology, Patriarchy and Marxist feminist theory**

As mentioned above, change is a key word in the vocabulary of Marxist-feminist critics. Marx famously said that that philosophers have interpreted the world, but the need is to change it. This sentence has important implications for feminist literary theory. How can change be brought about in the way readers and critics approach literary texts? Readers brought up on patriarchal norms of reading must be made to change their reading habits. They should be made to realize that there is no need to read like a man. Judith Fetterley’s *The Resisting Reader* tries to accomplish this task.

**Ideology** is a key concept in Marxist theory. Marx considered ideology as the ideas of the ruling class. However, in later revisionist accounts of this concept, ideology encompassed much more. Louis Althusser refined the concept of ideology by stating that it is “not the system of the real relations which govern the existence of individuals, but the imaginary relations of those individuals to the real relations in which they live” (1971:155).

To simplify Althusser’s concept of ideology a little bit-- it means that ideology is all pervasive and there is no escape for anyone from ideology. It is present in all those images that people confront in their daily life, all those stories that people hear, all those jokes that people crack, or the food that people consume and the
clothes that people wear. All these things constitute people’s real relations in their day to day life. Ideology operates like one’s common sense. It is also invisible like the oxygen that we inhale. Further ideology tries to maintain the status quo or the existing relations and patterns of power. It tries to make the powerful people believe that their power is legitimate and the powerless that their powerlessness is natural. In other words ideology tries to pass things off as natural. One of the contributions of theory, especially of Marxist theory is that it attacks the notion of the natural. It rather points to the constructed nature of things.

The concept of ideology was also used by Pierre Macherey in his highly original work A Theory of Literary Production (1966/2012). Macherey talked about a work’s unconscious. There are absences, gaps and fissures in a work which it is the job of the critic to discover. Discarding the old ideals of unity, as Terry Eagleton explains, for Macherey “the literary work of art is decentered and internally displaced: it is, so to speak, split apart from within by virtue of its relation to what lies outside it, the ideological world upon which it goes to work” (Eagleton, 2006: x). Macherey’s kind of reading is called symptomatic reading which does not try to impose a false unity on a text but rather tries to discover elements about a text which the text itself does not know.

What are the implications of the concept of ideology for literary studies in general and feminism in particular? Ideology interpellates readers. It summons them to take some subject positions. For women readers its implications are even more problematic. They are invited by the text to take subject positions in the patriarchal universe of the text.

**Patriarchy** operates very much like ideology. The operation of patriarchy can be seen in different walks of life. It is not difficult to detect the role of patriarchal ideology in all those images, stories, jokes and styles of dressing that we in our daily life. The clear division of roles for men and women in society also reflect the role of ideology. Patriarchal ideology tries put women in a subordinate position. It also tries to convince them that their subordination is natural. Patriarchal ideology comes through different mediums and so one cannot escape it.
There is obviously much to gain for feminist critics from Althusser’s and Macherey’s concepts of ideology, interpellation and production. The project of feminist critique whereby feminist critics discover androcentric bias (putting male at the centre of things) in works written by male writers can gain quite a lot from Althusser and Macherey. A whole lot of works, even those traditionally praised, may have an unconscious which may be problematic for women. The unconscious of the text may be steeped in a patriarchal ethos and as such a reading of it in a patriarchal set-up following patriarchal conventions may further perpetuate patriarchal ideology.

Marxist criticism has also put focus on the ideological nature of some literary forms. In fact Macherey’s emphasis on literary form does not sit comfortably with Terry Eagleton (despite his high praise for Macherey’s work).” It (A Theory of Literary Production) demands an enormous amount of literary form, as though this in itself were enough to break the power of ideology over men and women; and it overlooks the fact that form itself is ideological—that there is no literary convention or procedure which is not itself shot through with historical significance. (Eagleton, 2006: xi)” To put it differently form cannot be neatly separated from ideology. Thus the relationship between the rise of novel as a genre and the development of middle classes has been discussed by Marxist critics. They are of the view that the genre of novel has often presented a bourgeois point of view in literature.

The study of genre and its relationship to ideology holds a lot of interest for Marxist-feminist critics. Many established genres in literature have been exposed for their bias towards male sex. Thus epic glorifies war and warriors and does not go down well with many women readers. In the same way tragedy also glorifies the deeds of strong male characters. A novel of development considers the development of a male character much more important. Feminist intervention in gender generics has resulted in the transformation of some genres and in a new importance acquired by some genres. Thus a novel of development which takes up a woman character or a female gothic like that of Ann Radcliffe’s The Mysteries of Udolpho has been recognized following feminist intervention.
Raman Selden makes an apt observation when he says that “Marxist and feminist theories often work at a more general level, affecting the reader’s overall strategies of reading. Central ideas such as ‘mode of production’, ideology’ and ‘patriarchy’ shape the reader’s framework of interpretation in fundamental ways by directing attention to the inequality with which both economic and sexual power have been shared in the past and in the present (Selden,1989:140)” Selden’s brief discussion of Paradise Lost explains this further. Thus the description of the entrance of Paradise in book iv uses very heavy patriarchal imagery. However, the most interesting part of this feminist reading is the association of Eve with feeling and Adam with knowledge. In the two important scenes in the epic when Adam receives knowledge and warnings from Raphael and Michael, Eve is conspicuously absent. Eve rather prefers to get this knowledge from her husband. In other words Paradise Lost presents Eve in a subordinate position which she willingly accepts. Interestingly Milton’s patriarchal view is also uncritically accepted by its editor Alastair Fowler.

References


