
UNIT 1 MARXISM AND LITERATURE

Structure

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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.

UNIT 2 SOCIETY AND HISTORY: MARXIST VIEW

Structure

- 2.0 Objectives
- 2.1 Introduction
- 2.2 View of Society through History
- 2.3 Interpreting Society: an Altogether New Approach
- 2.4 What We Understand by Social Reality
- 2.5 Structure or Mode of Production
- 2.6 Relations of Production as Essential Part of the Mode
- 2.7 Social Nature of Mode of Production
- 2.8 The Idea of Revolution – Change and Transformation in Society
- 2.9 Let Us Sum Up
- 2.10 Questions
- 2.11 Glossary

2.0 OBJECTIVES

The aim of this unit is to:

- elucidate the basic concept of change in history and
- explain how the Marxist idea of the 'mode of production' constitutes the core of historical materialism.

2.1 INTRODUCTION

What we call the Marxist view of literature has left a lasting impression on twentieth century criticism and thought because of the strong emphasis it lays on history and society. The Marxist view interprets history as man-made and suggests that men and women of a particular time definitively shape their surroundings within the given historical constraints. Much, however, depends on what human beings wish and aspire for and what they are capable of. What is certain is that it is the collective will of actual people, and not any other power outside time that determines the course of human life. Thus, Marxism brings back the dignity of human endeavour to where it belongs—actual human beings themselves always engaged in the committed act of living, struggling, thinking.

2.2 VIEW OF SOCIETY THROUGH HISTORY

History is somewhat different from society. It gives a longer perspective to human action and behaviour and runs through different epochs of collective life. Marx's view was that the most vital connection between epochs has been class struggle, and that class struggle alone can explain adequately the nature of significant changes in society. It is a constant refrain in Marxism that 'society' by itself cannot enlighten us about significant changes since it can only refer to the actually present factors that govern and determine the life of human beings. What I mean is that the concept of society can merely tell us about the pressures we have to bear in an actual environment that is constituted of human beings bound in specific relationships. This idea is static and does not give enough credence to the *potentiality* of growth and development in life. We will notice that most of the theory and criticism of today talks of the importance of context in which a phenomenon is supposed to be understood. But context is merely a set of social trends and forces operating at a given time. Does it have a past? Also, could it be different from what it is at a given

time? In case our answer to these questions is in the affirmative, we are moving out of the boundaries of what I call 'society' and into a territory that is much larger. This territory is history that provides a 'past' to a society, connects it with those decisive trends which concretely formed and shaped it. Such a view also opens up the areas of the present social set up for use by a class of people who would give a different direction to it than the one into which it may have moved on its own. We will return again and again to these aspects of theory in this block. Suffice to say that Marxism concerns itself with both history and society and that while treating them as separate and specific, it relates the two meaningfully and thus affords us a perspective radically different from all those perspectives available with us.

2.3 INTERPRETING SOCIETY: AN ALTOGETHER NEW APPROACH

In the first unit, I called Marxism an approach and a point of view. This indicates a firm and clearly defined standpoint on the part of thinking individual in his/her society and implies that you cannot at the same time say two different and contradictory things about your environment. However, one sees this happening everyday because most of us are in the habit of shifting our positions rather frequently, forgetting that the world we live in is divided into two hostile camps, one dominant and the other dominated, both of which constantly critique and attack each other. We also tend to overlook the fact that one of the ways devised by the dominant camp in our world is to encourage a section within itself, one can call it the middle class, to take an apparently 'independent' and 'objective' position and question the validity of both camps, the oppressors and the oppressed - to assert that both can be equally right and wrong in different situations. In fact, a large part of this section of the middle class gradually comes to believe a case of self-deception, that an 'independent' and 'objective' position is indeed possible. The dominant camp on its part does not unnecessarily bother about such independent assertions of the middle class in society since it knows that the final socio-economic power wielded through the institution of the state rests safely in its hands. Are we not then surprised to notice that these 'independent' positions lack firmness, they vacillate like a pendulum between extremes and serve ultimately the interests of the forces of status quo. On the other hand, Marxism holds that the social reality of a time is always biased and that the new productive force, the industrial working class or the proletariat is capable of changing the unjust nature of social arrangement under capitalism.

This understanding enables the thinking individual, the usually interpreting entity in society, to look at the society not merely critically but also in deep moral terms. Even if we kept the expression 'moral terms' out of our discourse, we would realise that words such as 'misappropriation,' 'exploitation,' 'injustice,' etc. in Marx seem to lay great stress on the desirability of change in a society ridden with problems of inequality, mass hunger, profit-oriented planning, and unemployment. While most social commentators and analysts talk of these problems as if they were God-given and, therefore, meant to stay till some power above and beyond them intervened of its own will, Marx made a fundamental departure from such a stance by stating that "philosophers have so far merely interpreted the world. The point, however, is to change it." Mark the word "interpreted" specifically because it signifies the scholar's stance of standing apart from and above his environment to disinterestedly throw light on different aspects of life. Mere interpretation has a knack of going silent on contentious issues or adopting a soft, 'philosophical' attitude towards it. As is obvious, this is compromise at the social level. The individual's act of interpretation in such a case is not going to influence the governing class one bit. On the other hand, the exploited sections would not receive from the interpreter the help they require in their struggle to understand the importance of change. But philosophers interpret. This is their main job. "Change" on the other hand signifies looking at a process with the clear purpose of improving and transforming things. Interpretation in this case, therefore, is an integral part of the desire to change. One can go further than this and

say that there can be an analysis that is radical in its very structure, that questions the basis of a dominant formation. Such an analysis and interpretation would not leave scope for equivocation. I reiterate that Marxism is not merely a rational method to analyse and interpret but, the very theory of change.

2.4 WHAT WE UNDERSTAND BY SOCIAL REALITY

Let us define social reality which can be understood as the social environment of a particular time. Our surroundings constitute economic-political and ideological-cultural aspects. We realise sooner or later in life that the world we live in has its own rules and regulations. These rules and laws regulate our lives as well as put constraints on us. Do we have full or even partial awareness of their existence? We are told often that conditions of life determine our behaviour. It is not a cliché but a vital fact of reality. But in our world do we feel tied down *completely* with no freedom of our own to work with? My answer is that this is not the case since we take new and fresh decisions every now and then to fulfil our desires and aspirations. This we do individually. Such a thing is possible owing to the presence of a wide area in our society where initiative is allowed to a great extent. To say it in another way, this area has a number of possibilities, which we can exploit in order to do what we wish to. However, between possibilities and their actual realisation, there always remains a large gap. Why? May be, there is something that proves to be an obstruction on our way – it can be scarcity of funds, absence of facilities or a particular help from an agency not forthcoming. Thus, we can see the clash between an individual desire and general social factors. A painful aspect of our existence is that we do not act the way we please but always bear in mind the consequences of our actions. We seldom have the courage to work against the governing structure, however unjust and undesirable it may be. To make it simpler, we know that a stable job immediately after the completion of education is an essential prerequisite for setting up home. The decision to do so involves observing rules and regulations that would ensure a steady income. “Planning for career” by an individual is just another name for the observance of these regulations, which are well defined in most situations. This comes under ‘social reality.’

2.5 STRUCTURE OR MODE OF PRODUCTION

“Social reality” indicates a palpable and clearly defined structure that points towards important activities carried on by a sizeable number of people. These activities are closely related to the production and distribution of things. They are so important to our lives that we take them for granted, like the air and water. But we are generally oblivious of them while thinking about society. This is bad. We do not realise that without these activities, the existence and survival of life is impossible. For instance, factories work continuously to produce goods that we use in daily life and this production is carried on in accordance with market-demands. Finished goods reach the retail shop through the whole sale market to be made available to the individual consumer. In the same way, raw materials are produced through agricultural activity that goes on round the year. There is a market-segment that works as a bridge between the agricultural produce (cotton, coal, and petroleum) on the one side and industry (cloth, oil, petrol and steel) on the other. All this is part of a highly organised and complex activity, something we can comprehend fully or sufficiently only after a great deal of mental effort. This activity also impinges not only upon our social living but also our psyche and consciousness, morality and ethics. Have we ever thought consciously about this? Perhaps not. May be, we have left it to economists to ponder over, which is wrong since economists would not enter areas of politics, law, social living, psyche and consciousness.

By now, it should be clear to us that even looked at from a capable individual’s point of view, our world does not present an entirely rosy picture, that it is not an easy place to live in, sympathetic to our existence and promoting our interests. In fact, the

world around us appears to have a rock-like solidity that resists our efforts to influence it. Secondly, the most important activity in such a world, in any world for that matter, is production, which entails a long and definite process of organised activity. Marx considered production as the most crucial aspect of *human* existence. In his words, "Men can be distinguished from animals by consciousness, by religion or anything else you like. They themselves begin to distinguish themselves from animals as soon as they begin to *produce* their means of subsistence, a step which is conditioned by their physical organisation. By producing their means of subsistence men are indirectly producing their actual material life.... As individuals express their life, so they are. What they are, therefore, coincides with their production, both with *what* they produce and with *how* they produce. The nature of individuals thus depends on the material conditions determining their production." (Marx's emphasis. *The German Ideology*). Notice that Marx's comment is factual and explanatory. What he has asserted is that production is not outside human beings but between and within them and that by producing their means of living, human beings in fact produce themselves. The last sentence in this quotation is a little more difficult to comprehend since we generally believe, opposite to what Marx has said, that our nature is independent and does not take influence from material conditions. In fact, Marx's word is stronger – it is not "influence" but "dependence."

Let us ponder over 'organised activity' -- the production-distribution process. For the lay person, as stated above, this is quite simple, she or he thinking that it is something given at any moment and not worth much attention. However, the market-segment that we seem to have mentioned just in passing (we have not) is a very intricate mechanism. It also reflects the nature of people engaged in the production of raw materials or industrial goods, and industrial production as such. Still more, it dictates what should be produced. Are we surprised that the market is not a mere agency of distribution through selling and buying of produced goods? This it can be in a different system, not in the capitalist one in which we operate at present.

Thus, production mechanism places the members of the society in a specific relationship, that of the employer and employee, the employer being the owner of the means of production (land, raw materials and factory) and the employee who (with labour-power as his sole resource) is available merely as a purchasable commodity himself. This sounds crude – how, is it that a full-fledged human being is a commodity open for sale in the market? But this is true, the same way as slave trade has been in the past. In the modern context, look at the way the army of unemployed (their number is increasing alarmingly in our world) wait for jobs and are ready under social compulsions to carry out any work the employers might demand of them. This is one aspect of the mode of production.

2.6 RELATIONS OF PRODUCTION AS ESSENTIAL PART OF THE MODE

Let us take help directly from Karl Marx's explanation of the social phenomenon of which, according to him, human beings are always a part. Marx has called this aspect of social existence 'production relations' under which he has visualised human beings as divided into two groups – those who own the means of production and those others who work on land or in manufacturing units, big and small. This, according to Marx, is the central condition of human existence in the modern world, bound as people are under these relations to produce means of subsistence. It will become clear, however, that what I call means of subsistence are in fact something else over whose choice only the economically powerful sections have absolute control.

A look at production relations would show that the agency of the state under modern capitalism operates to distribute the social surplus in a particular way. Under this operation, the social surplus flows into the hands of the owning group while the producers of surplus, the workers get only their 'wages,' a name for the cost of what

Marx calls their labour power. Marx places the whole activity with the social and legal sanction that it gets at every point of time in history under 'economic mode of production.'

**Society and History:
Marxist View**

An economic mode of production – the combination of methods and means of production – is a highly complex phenomenon and is, as we have said above, the most vital factor of human existence at a given time. It touches upon every single aspect of life. Without going into further clarification, we can say that insofar as we are concerned, the capitalist mode of production, with exploitation of human labour at its centre, is the single most governing principle of our time. We can see the similarity between capitalist countries, all of which have a common attitude towards their common people. It is rarely, if at all, that people are looked at as human beings with a sense of dignity in them. There are, of course, differences such as the less or more availability of resources in individual capitalist countries. The plight of people is different in rich nations than in the poor ones. But, as I have said, the attitude of the governing system in them is the same towards ordinary human beings. This is the reality of the whole of capitalist world today. This can truly be called the social reality of our time.

2.7 SOCIAL NATURE OF MODE OF PRODUCTION

One deeply philosophical point we can make in this context is that a particular mode of production always exists prior to the birth of human beings and that it cannot be ignored or wished away. This means that at every given point in history, a well-established social system already exists. Need we be told this, knowing well enough that a mechanism can be seen as given when human beings are born and that it regulates as well as oppresses their urges, expectations and aspirations? This could appear something like fate, a wholly determining factor of human existence. We would see later that "fate" or "wholly determining factor" are wrong expressions, since they negate and preclude human endeavour as well as initiative, as a highly creative and progressive enterprise. In this context, the right expression that Marx has used again and again is "conditions of existence." I talk, of course, keeping in view mankind's history of the last few thousand years in which one or the other mode of production has emerged to determine and influence the life of people. Social reality, therefore, is what we are born to and in which we live as we grow up and operate as human beings. As I have said, the philosophical dimension of this Marxist view should not be overlooked. On the one hand, it considers human beings as born in a given world, which puts constraints on them. On the other hand, it recognises the growing *productive* potential, which empowers them to change their surroundings. Thus, Marxism can be applied to sharply critique the concept of fate or a superior power on one side and uncontrolled all-powerful human behaviour on the other. This means that human beings are neither totally helpless before circumstances nor totally free from the laws and norms of their world. Both concepts falter over the idea of 'conditions of existence' according to which human beings understand and change their circumstances to the extent possible.

2.8 THE IDEA OF REVOLUTION – CHANGE AND TRANSFORMATION IN SOCIETY

The owning and the working classes always remain actively engaged in the working of society. This engagement by the two in a common enterprise causes a great deal of hostility in them towards each other in spite of the fact that the enterprise is productive in a meaningful progressive sense. We are relatively clear about productivity at this stage. What do we mean by saying that human beings' social productivity is progressive, that it always increases and expands and thereby moves towards production of bigger and yet bigger amounts of things and facilities? Today, newer ways of producing things are being invented every moment. No ruling or

owning class can stop this process. In fact, a ruling class survives upon its increasing productive capacity. This can be explained by referring to the urge in us to invent new sources of power and new means of production such as the "the hand-mill" and "the steam engine," to use Marx's own examples. Imagine what the steam engine did to the productive process in nineteenth century Europe. It increased human productive power manifold and changed the landscape of the whole world. Big machines would not have been possible without the steam engine and European nations would not have been all that powerful on the globe without industrialisation. The basic point I make is that different factors in eighteenth century Europe necessitated study and research towards expanding the productive base. Could the eighteenth century merchants, traders and small-scale manufacturers in Europe stop this process of movement towards greater productivity? My answer is that they could not, since their existence and stay as manufacturers and traders depended entirely upon working for and inventing new sources of productive power. Yes, the opponents of the manufacturing sections in the eighteenth century, the feudal nobility (not the trading-manufacturing classes) wished to stop this process through political action. Imagine the fights that took place between the traditionalists and moderns in the English parliament of the time. That is why one can assert that a mode of production emerges in human history consequent upon the interplay of social forces and that large areas of human life are continuously active to sustain and strengthen, or oppose and destroy, the mode. That is how a new mode emerges by replacing an already existing one.

What happens when there is a substantial change in the productive forces. The changed forces introduce a new system of production and distribution to meet their requirements, which are different from the ones existing earlier. This implies that the nineteenth century system of production with the coming in of the steam engine would require employment of an extremely large number of workers under one big factory. One can imagine the outcome of such an arrangement in which the production of goods is split up in small segments for which workers work separately. This can be called big manufacture, which also indicates huge piles of raw materials on one side of the factory and an equally huge pile of finished goods on the other. Since the work has been split up in tiny fragments and workers perform only specialised repetitive jobs, a new category of employees other than and in addition to workers is needed to coordinate the whole effort. They constitute the supervisors, overseers, etc. inside the factory and those others outside the factory to whom the responsibility of buying raw materials, sending finished goods to the market, along with maintaining accounts, etc. has been assigned. Please mark what I say. This arrangement with the attendant numbers of people involved in it under different and specific categories of work would be unthinkable anywhere in Europe or elsewhere in the pre-industrial, pre-steam engine phase. And I have talked of only the production in the big factory, which cannot be an isolated spot in society. The new type of factory compels the owners and managers of production to see to it that the workers, who may have been brought from faraway villages to one place where the factory is situated, are settled in nearby areas. This could result in the emergence of big cities and markets of a new kind in a matter of decades. Who can stop this entire happening when new productive forces have been unleashed by human beings at a particular juncture in history?

Increased production in the factory means wealth of a new kind, which is different in form from land, cattle, grain or gold. Earlier, the rich sections of society were named aristocrats, landowners, gentlemen or merchant-manufacturers since they "appropriated" the surplus of an old kind. In the industrial phase, there is a different breed of rich people. Marx called them the industrial bourgeoisie. Would this situation not have caused a great deal of heartburn among the traditional rich whose economic power faced continuous erosion? How did they cope with the new developments? Think of answers to these questions.

This discussion leads us to the idea of class struggle under which two mutually opposed sections of society remain in a state of constant clash. These sections comprise the haves and have-not, the industrial bourgeoisie and the proletariat. Such a relationship of clash or antagonism between the two classes is a significant aspect of movement and progress in history because the clash in society owes its existence to the distribution of socially produced goods, meaning thereby that even though goods are socially or collectively produced, their distribution or sharing is not social in nature. It is individual. The owner of the means of production appropriates, or misappropriates to himself all that has been produced, which is called surplus produce by Marx, leaving merely the means of subsistence, the wages paid to the employees, to the labouring men, women and children.

In the light of what has been said above, let us briefly look at the relationship that may exist between society and literature. Critics have rightly thought in the past that literature is a mirror of life and society and that whatever is present in the latter is reflected in the former. The theory goes back far in time but for us it would be more pertinent to remember the name of Matthew Arnold who asserted that literature attains value because of its serious engagement with the moral and spiritual issues of the time of its writing. Still, most of us refuse to probe the relationship we are talking about with a view to creating an awareness of the spirit of a period through its literature. Marxism can help us sufficiently well in this direction. How many of us consider the act of placing a mirror before society? Then, would it be correct to call literature a mirror of society? The question is difficult. Instead, we could approach the issue of relationship between social reality and literature. Mirror as a reflector is all right but it may not reflect society the way society *actually* functions or is *actually* constituted. In the first place, if we deal with it in simple terms, much would depend on where the mirror is placed in society and with what purpose. Mark the word "is placed" in this sentence and think whether "is placed" is not used to hide the identity of the subject. We can use the active voice to highlight the fact that the writer places the mirror according to her or his notion and that she or he does this to attain an objective. I shall analyse the role and function of the writer elsewhere in this block with which the idea of reflection of society in literature is significantly linked. There, I shall also consider the usefulness and efficacy of the concept of reflection in a discussion about literature.

2.9 LET US SUM UP

Marxism helps us understand society as a part of long human history in whose growth and development class struggle plays a crucial role. At a given time, a society should be seen as an organisation that revolves around production. The wrong and unjust distribution of social surplus is at the root of most social problems today. Marxism stresses upon the desirability of social justice and a radical reorganisation of society along revolutionary humanist lines.

2.10 QUESTIONS:

1. What according to Marxism is mode of production? Is it merely economic in nature, a subject to be studied and discussed by an economist and of no consequence for students of philosophy, social sciences and humanities?
2. What is the ideological implication of "philosophers have so far *interpreted* the world. The point, however, is to *change* it"?

2.11 GLOSSARY

- 'Philosophical':** A weak word in our context. It stands for 'mere study,' the tendency to avoid a clear social stand. Marx demarcated it from 'change.'
- Produce:** Signifies a lot more than making goods in a factory. According to Marx, the tendency to produce is human as well as creative. The word is further expanded by Marx to signify 'mode of production' which encompasses the whole of hitherto known human history.
- Production relations:** Social relations – as between employer and employee, master and slave, lord and serf – which determine the way social surplus would be distributed.

UNIT 3 REPRESENTING AND CRITIQUING SOCIETY: SUPERSTRUCTURES

Structure

- 3.0 Objectives
- 3.1 Introduction
- 3.2 How to Interpret 'Superstructure'
 - 3.2.1 Law as Superstructure.
 - 3.2.2 Political Superstructure
 - 3.2.3 Religious Superstructure
- 3.3 Actual and Potential Role of Philosophy as Superstructure
- 3.4 The Realm of Culture and Literature.
- 3.5 The Nature of the Base and its Politics
- 3.6 Some Conceptual Difficulties.
- 3.7 Let Us Sum Up
- 3.8 Questions
- 3.9 Glossary

3.0 OBJECTIVES

In this unit we will:

- consider the concept of superstructure in general and see its ramifications in politics, philosophy and literature and.
- explain the nature of base-superstructure relationship.

3.1 INTRODUCTION

First, let us comprehend the way in which social reality and literature are related to each other. In my opinion, the relationship is largely faithful and realistic. We notice that the novels written in the eighteenth century tell us a great deal about the way people lived at the time—one thing that particularly comes to mind is that the eighteenth century men and women were highly courageous and bold and that they dared to critique the existing notions of morality and ethics. This would have been unimaginable in the previous centuries. The very idea of using reason to grasp the complex questions of human behaviour would ruffle a few feathers. The writers were courageous enough to comment on the burning issues of the day even if it went against the interests of the privileged sections. Eighteenth century literature is so different in nature and content that one is left wondering where all those kings, queens, princes and princesses have gone who so strongly dominated the literary representation in the earlier centuries. It is a simple question but we should seriously consider it to know that literature shows to the reader what it sees in its surroundings and that the relationship between the two is vital.

Does literature also *critique* the surroundings in which it is produced? I ask this in somewhat precise terms because words such as “showing,” “representing” or “reflecting” do not necessarily indicate the possible act of critiquing by a literary work. Critiquing involves a point of view that the writer adopts. In case the writer does so, from where has s/he received the point of view? Again, how has this point of view evolved in the course of living and writing? A related question could be: how does it pertain to the reality of the time when the work was composed? Finally, the work itself makes its specific assertions and emphases and chooses particular sequences of narration. Do these things also not betray the existence of a point of

view? In the following pages, I plan to acquaint you with these and other aspects of writing from an angle that has been characterised as Marxist.

3.2 HOW TO INTERPRET SUPERSTRUCTURES

In order to explain social reality, Marx uses the metaphor of 'a building', which has a base or a structure (foundation, pillars) and a superstructure, something standing upon or emerging from the foundation. The building can be characterised as wholeness consisting of highly active parts. In the previous unit, we cast a glance largely at the base or what can be called the mode of production. This base determined the lives of people in all aspects and drew lines within which the whole of social existence was enclosed. Such a structure was useful in that it provided economic sustenance and organised productive activity for the people. The social structure also compelled human beings to follow the laws of production, to achieve facility and ease in life. In this sense, the structure was a "condition of existence" in more ways than one.

What about the superstructure? Did superstructure run parallel to the structure and, therefore, have an existence independent of organised human production? Some of us assign such independence to norms of morality, philosophical ideas and literature, and allow it to emerge in our discourse thought-categories such as 'literary history' and 'philosophical evolution.' Do we not? But if such a thing as literary history were possible, there would certainly be a world of superstructure totally unconnected with the actual conditions of people (structure) in history. What is the case? The Marxist position on this question is that the superstructure is closely linked to the base in the final analysis and is determined by it.

According to Marx, superstructure was totally man-made, unlike the base in which a strong component of nature (inanimate and animate) existed. Whereas base manifests the planned collective labour of men and women under a social framework, superstructure is evolved to interpret, explain and justify the distribution of social surplus. As people fight for survival in the base, they become conscious of its nature in their minds, which constitute the area of superstructure. Understandably, a society formed of and working through contending classes under a mode of production requires a great deal of conscious explanation as to why a small section of society should enjoy ownership of wealth and resources and an overwhelmingly large mass of people live at the subsistence level. This is what everyone would like to know. Firstly, in spite of an oppressive state machinery – army, police, bureaucracy – to protect the interests of the privileged few, the owning section needs an acceptable social argument to say that they have a legitimate claim on the surplus wealth generated on the strength of human labour through the working of a particular mode of production. The law most substantially meets this need, or what Marx called 'the legal superstructure.'

3.2.1 Law as Superstructure

What actually happens is that at every point in history, competent minds work assiduously to frame laws that would legitimise the misappropriation of socially generated resources by a few in society. The property owners misappropriate the surplus 'legally.' In this sense, the existing law at a particular time becomes the perspective for the state to function under, it provides sufficient ground for the large bureaucracy (civil, military) and the judiciary to enlarge upon implement and administer 'justice.' See the irony. Justice is interpreted and explained according to the requirements of a mode of production and projected on behalf of the privileged sections as something moral, spiritual and universal! Thus, justice is simply understood as social sanction for exploitation and misappropriation (the owning classes, however, describe it not as misappropriation but their right) and is complexly worked out in high philosophical terms. Notice also how legal luminaries in societies carry on debates about it all over the world.

however, legal superstructure is quite close to the working of the mode of production, it directly deals with the rationale of social distribution and persuades the working people to believe that they have a right only on what they get as wages. Religious, philosophical and cultural superstructures have a somewhat tenuous link with the base, since individuals active in these spheres have the strange notion of independent operation.

3.2.2 The Political Superstructure

Marx has accorded a most important place to the political realm of human existence. According to him, it is mainly politics in which people fight their battle for change. Political formations such as parties play such a vital role in the life of a society that each formation is supposed to project the view of a distinct class and mobilise masses on behalf of that class. One can scarcely overlook the role of trade unions in mid-nineteenth century England and France, which focused popular attention on the burning issues of the day. Politics has remained so crucial to the ruling bourgeois classes in England that it has enabled entrepreneurship and industry to decisively seize economic power and privilege from the feudal nobility and aristocracy in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The lesson to be learnt from the role politics has played in history is that it should be considered the science of changing society. The supremacy assigned to the political superstructure by Marx and later radical thinkers is due to the fact that it acts directly on the base to transform its working. Politics has also the greatest sense of immediacy and urgency in that it is entirely present-centred and contemporary. In fact, it is politics that lends an activist edge to philosophy, ideology, religious beliefs, culture and literature. You would notice that this entire block on the Marxist idea of literature is permeated, as Marx would have it, by the desirability of change along humanist lines. It is for this reason that I have sparingly discussed politics or the role of political superstructures as separate from other superstructural realms.

3.2.3 The Religious Superstructure

It may sound odd that the divine and Godly aspect has a tangible link with the social structure, that the ahistorical and universal-looking religious principles have deep roots in the society of their times. These principles establish concrete links with the society in which they exist and play a definite role. They influence change and modify or strengthen people's views. There is no doubt that at the apparent level, religion appears to be placed far above people's mundane existence and seems to guide them from a distant spiritual position. However, we can put a clear stamp of social pressures and compulsions on religious beliefs as well as practices. If Christianity has undergone so many changes since the renaissance, the reason could surely be traced to the developments in the economy and polity of European societies of the time. We would also notice that the visualisation of God at two points of time has been done radically differently, that the feudal concept of God is not the same as the capitalist one, the former being oppressive, overbearing and paternally beneficent and the latter a relatively friendly, persuasive and sympathetic entity. It would be fascinating to study religious principles from this angle where the norms and ideas behind people's *general* spiritual responses reflect myriad facets of an actual social belief rooted in time. In this context, we can refer to Milton the poet who captures distinct forms of the Divine attitude in God and Son in *Paradise Lost*. Because of the changes at the base, the idea of God and Christianity acquires an altogether new ring in the writings of the eighteenth century. What concrete shape does the Christian dimension of human behaviour assume in the post-Cromwellian era and how do we appreciate the rationale behind this development?

The religious superstructure has two clear end-points – the first touching the emotional-spiritual state of ordinary people and the second one compelling religious thinkers, poets and writers to correlate new responses to the already established

notions of spirituality and religiosity. The two coalesce into a new outlook, which attempts answers to fresh social questions. Take the example of Parson Adams in Fielding's *Joseph Andrews*. Adams is not a traditional and rigid preacher of Christianity. Instead, he is a good friend, enjoys fun and is fond of reading as well as ale. His parameters are Christian, but within them one sees a great deal of the eighteenth century English response. Adams symbolises the religious superstructure at its active best and Fielding who captures its working in the novel himself seems to be enjoying the presence of a strong secular component of it. Adams is the religious need of the hour in the eighteenth century without whose help the new class of merchants and traders cannot internalise the old values of Christian tradition. He is a concrete eighteenth century construction of the religious idea – genuine spirit of helpfulness, loyalty, learning and optimism.

Philosophical and cultural superstructures work in a still more intricate way. The reason behind the manner of their peculiar functioning is that they deal with ideas, feelings and emotions. Faith distinguishes religion from philosophy and in the latter, one has to work out, analyse and explain rather than merely tell or preach. There is little scope for questioning or doubt in the former (faith does not allow query) while it is the mainstay of philosophy. In this way, the philosophical superstructure gains further independence from the base. The two end-points I have talked of in the case of religious superstructure are absent here, particularly in the case of philosophy.

While discussing this, one thing that is to be particularly kept in mind is that there is no one-to-one correlation between these superstructures and the economic mode and that the economic mode is visible to people more as a distortion than in realistic proportion. Why? This may be so because the nature of the base is grasped and comprehended, rightly or wrongly, in the consciousness of people. Let us, therefore, see how people become conscious of the base in philosophy – the arena of thought.

3.3 ACTUAL AND POTENTIAL ROLE OF PHILOSOPHY AS SUPERSTRUCTURE

Abstractions in philosophy serve the purpose of unifying ordinary details of life into a coherent pattern. This is an important function from the point of view of society. Ordinary occurrences in life do not tell us much unless they are seen together as part of a phenomenon. Helping us to place day-to-day happenings in a general perspective, philosophy becomes the business of making sense and directs people's perceptions towards definite attitudes. This act of thought on the part of the ruling class can be defined as their attempt to harness philosophy for political use. There is, however, a problem. Philosophy by nature is not passive and can stretch itself to see beyond the limits set by a governing order. It can so happen, as it does in many a case, and to the detriment of precise analysis of an existing mode, that when raised to a higher level, this business of making sense provides the aura of universality to this important human endeavour. By the sheer force of abstraction, philosophical activity makes the occurrences of a period appear timeless. As I have said, this has pitfalls. But the broadened scope of philosophy has also turned out to be useful in specific phases of history. This shows how active and autonomous superstructural elements may be. We do, for instance, identify ourselves with events and people of faraway countries since, philosophically seen, they appear connected with us in thoughts, values and aspirations. Geographically and culturally apart, people of different societies can be knit into an impressive pattern under categories such as race, creed or broad humanity.

What happens when we question and critique the values and moral preferences of a time? I raise this question to suggest that philosophical activity, because of its social potential, is a double-edged weapon. At a particular time, we raise objections to certain happenings because we do not derive enough satisfaction from the life around

us. This clash of opposing values in the philosophical superstructure enables us to evolve alternative principles of behaviour. At least, we start looking at the existing norms and principles, which became well entrenched in the past. Suppose we did it in the case of thought-patterns that obtained in the past and questioned their basis in a new situation. This would be a subversive intellectual activity. The activity would put us in a different grade of intellectual courage and call upon us to confront the vested interests on the strength of our reasoning capability. We would then, to use Marx's phrase, be confronting "reality with reason." It is possible that while doing so, we may have been inspired by developments in another country. See the leap of philosophy, of thought, from one country and society to another. In this sense, the scope of philosophical discourse is immense. At the same time, the philosophical discourse on many an occasion places normative or religious ideas under the gaze of human rationality and opens up vast areas of useful reflection. In the process, as we noted above, we may feel that philosophical abstractions help us transcend the barriers of time and place because of which we could establish meaningful links with developments in other periods and societies. That is why philosophical ideas and truths of another time still appeal to us. As I have said, this cannot be explained with direct reference to the economic mode but has to be studied in its specific evolution.

3.4 THE REALM OF CULTURE AS SUPERSTRUCTURE

We confront this nature of an active and autonomous superstructure still more clearly in the case of culture and literature. These segments of human life in particular phases of history project joys, pains and sufferings of human beings existing then in such a way that they (joys, pains, etc.) appear to be the expressions of our own feelings and emotions at present. What is this particular way? Does this suggest that a kind of intensity and immediacy enters the represented feelings and makes it attractive to a distant audience? It is for this reason, perhaps, that literary works produced far away from our time and place touch deep chords in our heart. It cannot, therefore, be said that culture and literature bear a direct or immediate connection with a specific base. They indeed give the impression that they do not at all belong to the realm of superstructure of a particular epoch, but appeal to humanity as universal and timeless phenomena.

We can approach this question from a different angle also. In spite of some universalistic features, literature, philosophy and religion bear a close relationship to their social environment, and in one particular respect – that of playing a role – they become as concrete a segment of society as economy. These are shaped and constructed by those active men and women who have been deeply engrossed in the processes of changing their environment – be they concerning faiths, values, ideals or norms. Yes, faith, values and ideals are not God-given or universal. They only appear to be so. Actually, they are *constructs*, consciously forged ideas to explain specific trends, which people use in their lives. And since they are *constructs*, the privileged sections in society always keep track of them, monitor them for the purpose of ensuring their own class security and safety in the existing order. Thus, superstructure is not left untouched or unmediated by the base but in fact is sought to be consciously tempered to perpetuate the class rule. We cannot deny that processes of intellectual or emotional life that engage the attention of people at a particular time touch upon their vital social interests. We cannot ignore the fact that the state or the powers that be come out openly in support of religious thinkers, philosophers and writers and patronise them in modern times. Also note that those philosophers and writers are chosen for support and patronage by the state that willfully ignore the question of justice and equality. The point I am making is that the privileged sections take deep interest in what I call the construction of facts and ideals. We notice almost daily that certain writers and thinkers make it their mission to, not merely uphold but explain as well religiosity and spirituality while there are those who courageously subject any such idea to critical examination from the humanist angle. Conversely, the sections that control society also look unkindly at those writers whose ideas and imaginative

representations prove inconvenient to the existing set-up. History is replete with examples of state or social repression of a number of thinkers, writers and artists. This makes our task of comprehending and judging reality extremely difficult. At the same time, it is this concrete activity of writers vis-à-vis their environment that imparts significance to their work. They write to uphold or attack, acquiesce in or question a trend. What I wish to stress here is that cultural and philosophical superstructures have a great deal of intimate connection with the structure prevailing at the time of their emergence. In fact, the close identification of a writer with the issues of his/her time lends such intensity to their works that the works inspire not merely contemporary readers but also those of posterity, a point I have touched upon above.

As is clear, Marx made a distinction between not only the structure and the superstructure but also between different superstructures. This was done to suggest that superstructures do not directly correspond to the social reality of their time and have in fact a specificity entirely their own. But the concept of specificity should in no way be used to separate the superstructures from their base or from one another. In times of intense change, the cultural superstructure, the most distanced from the base, may assume political overtones and can work almost directly on the base. Let us take the example of political and literary superstructures working in unison. In a limited sense, the political activity of a period is closely related to the governing and governed classes, the two, standing face-to-face with each other in hostile confrontation. In this sense, politics may be considered the most active part of superstructure, so much so that in fact, it could appear a very necessary segment of the base itself where the employers and employees confront each other physically and argue about their respective standpoints. What I imply is that particularly working people become active in the political superstructure to bring about a radical change in their social environment, which means that they get together under a commonly conceived programme and hit collectively at vested economic interests. This is done by the mass of human beings not necessarily in terms of violent subversion of the state machinery or civil society behind which the ruling class stands organised in any case, but through winning over the majority of the members of society to their side. On their part, the governing class is constantly busy in proving to the society through its political formations that its role is that of a responsible leader. Whatever fissures occur in the social sphere under this phenomenon require to be assiduously explained by politics on both sides in terms of shifts from accepted norms of propriety, morality and tradition.

The governing class also distorts and misinterprets through its political formation the emerging political alternative. Consider the manner in which the feudal structure in England fought in so many devious ways with emerging democratic trends. The fact was that, as Andrew Milner has stated, "By the seventeenth century the subordinate capitalist mode of production had developed to the point at which it came into clear contradiction with the dominant feudal mode" (*John Milton and the English Revolution* – London: Macmillan, 1981, p. 66). That it crumbled gradually under pressure from a new and progressive bourgeois class is not indicative of its weak social urge or motivation. It was an extremely violent struggle. The process of active hostility between the two classes lasted well over a hundred and fifty years and the eighteenth century witnessed an inexorable march of the new class towards complete domination of society. Today, we can see this inevitability of historical emergence in the eighteenth century clearly since we stand at a distance in time from the phenomenon. But imagine the case of those writers who stood in the thick of things and bore upon their nerves the pressures of the day. This long and complex process was well captured by writers such as John Milton, Henry Fielding and William Blake. See how their writing is marked by the distinction between good and bad, right and wrong, desirable and undesirable. They were not humanist writers in the usual sense of the term but were sharp critics of those tendencies that worked against the interests of the common masses. These writers were intelligent enough not to be taken in by words such as 'tradition,' 'patriotism,' 'honour' and 'virtue.' They took it as their job

to approach the reader with the message of change. There is no doubt that their literary behaviour involved a great deal of debate, disagreement and even violent exchange of words. And the whole thing corresponded to that which happened in the political sphere of the period. The point to note is that clashes and confrontations in the political superstructure had a direct impact on what has been called the economic mode of production and that the political superstructure derived its punch, its effectiveness from its linkage with the socio-economic reality.

How is the cultural superstructure or more relevantly literature distinct in its operation from the politics of the period? The question is well asked since there does exist a clear gap between the two superstructures. Literature, for instance, recognises different parametres of its activity and addresses those issues more sharply, which relate to the emotional and moral needs of people. It also uses what can be called the imaginative mode under which focus is provided to vital and central areas of life as against those, which are trivial or mundane. The imaginative mode helps the writer concentrate upon the chosen areas of existence, which can become symbols of dynamic behaviour in course of time.

3.5 THE NATURE OF THE BASE AND ITS POLITICS

Regarding the base, Marx's observation is that in actual history, it changes through a great deal of violence. The reason is simple. Marx clearly saw that the owning class of the day put up stiff resistance to the forces of change. You cannot persuade an owner to give up his wealth, land and privileges for the benefit of a more progressive section, the real producers, or for the greater good of society. Under capitalism particularly, the greater good can wait. What is considered essential is personal profit. This is in spite of the fact that most religious thinkers, poets, saints and mystics tell the world about the evil influence of money, power and prestige. There is no doubt that these people are right in their observation about the society of their time. But the owning classes pay lip service to them and to the ideals they preach. In reality, the owners protect their privileges with all their might. Hence the question. The example of the Cromwellian revolution in England comes to mind when a whole society stood up against the king and by dethroning him, took over the reins of power. It was not a peaceful transition from monarchy to republicanism by any reckoning. There were a large number of people, specifically those supporting monarchy and feudal land-relations, who found the new ideas of equality extremely threatening. This made them side with the king who with the traditional authority and divinely sanctioned superiority could sway the mind of the common English people. However, the king did more than appeal to the sense of tradition of his subjects. He felt greatly threatened by the emergence of new ideas of equality, justice and human endeavour. Seeing the potential danger of this new awareness, he decided to ride roughshod on those who championed new values. The aristocracy stood solidly behind him in this venture of attack on the forces of change. On the other side were the merchants and traders of the day who had emerged from the commonality of English life and still had deep roots in it. They led the people in their revolt and hit back to capture important points of power. Of course, unity among them required a good deal of planning, forethought and vision. These latter were people fired by idealism and high notions of morality. English criticism of today is not able to give due recognition to this aspect of the Cromwellian revolution. Why? Try to find an answer to this question. From my side, I give a clue. Most English criticism today is ill equipped to withstand pressures of contemporary bourgeois ideology and shows no signs of having a free and objective outlook. Consequently, it is biased against the idea of change and dynamic thought. I shall elaborate it later in this block. Coming back to the antagonism that existed between aristocracy and the common people in seventeenth century England, one saw a growing idealistic upsurge in the sixteen thirties and forties. In the process, as we know, King Charles I was executed and his son ran away to France. It is true that the newfound power of the people lasted only for a short while but a mortal blow had been dealt at the prevailing base, which became

totally different from what it was before the revolution. Land relations were radically changed and the merchants became more powerful. They could now decisively direct the path of the parliament. Politics in the parliament could no more be used to the detriment of the newly emerged sections of trade. In Milner's words, "The English bourgeoisie had disposed of one recalcitrant king, and it was to prove perfectly capable of disposing of another in 1688 ... In this manner, the whole structure of the feudal absolutist state was abolished and replaced by the *quite different* set of political institutions which composed the constitutional monarchy" (73). That is what happens at the base when the spirit of change threatens and takes control of the minds of men.

3.6 'SUPERSTRUCTURES' – SOME CONCEPTUAL DIFFICULTIES

Great and decisive changes occur at the base – it is there that the two opposing classes fight unto finish for survival. Such violent clashes do not occur in the superstructure. Marx has said, "With the change of the economic foundation, the entire immense superstructure is more or less rapidly transformed". The word "transformed" is quite significant since the superstructure, according to Marx, *follows* the changes in the base. One important example is of the legal superstructure which legitimises and facilitates the running of the new system. We notice that in law the influences of change can be seen first and law *follows* the restructured base later. However, the case of philosophy, ideology or culture is not the same. People discern the possibility of change as well as its negative or positive aspects in philosophy or ideology much before the occurrence of social upheaval. Also, echoes of dissatisfaction, grievance and complaint get reflected in literature prior to the happenings at the base. In this sense, all these superstructures influence the base and intensify the conflict there rather than be transformed by it. Keeping this in mind, transformation should not be taken literally. Therefore, we have to interpret Marx's statement about superstructure in a different manner. The question ought to be: How do people become conscious within the superstructure of their conditions of existence if the change takes place first in the base? To repeat, how do people become active in the political superstructure and throw away the shackles of the prevailing base, which has become redundant and needs to be changed so that the productive powers of humanity are free to flow in a progressive historical direction? I will leave it as a question for you to ponder over, as to how Marx's view of the base-superstructure relationship should make sense to you.

The next issue we can raise is linked with historical conflict. Marx says that we have to distinctly understand the nature of ideological transformation of "the legal, political, religious, aesthetic or philosophical – in short ideological forms in which men become conscious of this conflict (between productive forces and relations of production) and fight it out."

While commenting generally on the base-superstructure relationship, Marx only briefly expressed his view. Actually, Marx talked of the base-superstructure relationship in simple, clear terms with the aim that these two components of social reality would be understood in theory, in abstraction. He wished to be sure that social scientists and activists comprehended the crucial existence of a base. Marx's idea of the base proved that the idealist thinkers, given to wanton flights of fancy, were wrong in believing that social reality was some kind of clay open for wishful moulding by human beings. Without presenting the base as a decisive and quite difficult factor, Marx could not emphasise the importance of social change at the level of the mode of production. I repeat Marx's basic premise that, "The philosophers have so far interpreted the world. The point, however, is to change it." This meant that social reality had to be taken out of the domain of philosophers and put in the hands of those who were the real producers, the proletariat. Till one did it, nothing decisive would happen. The concept of base was meant to work totally

against those who as idealists merely “interpreted” the world, while the world with its all-governing and influencing base remained intact to exploit and oppress the working masses of society. Once this was accepted in theory, we can easily recognise that the superstructure as a realm of human thought and creativity interacts in fact significantly with the base.

3.7 LET US SUM UP

For Marx, it was necessary to emphasise the concept of base since it provided solidity and materiality to the discourse of change. What I mean is that the discourse of change operates in the superstructure – politics, philosophy, religion, culture – while its specific effectiveness and significance is derived from its deep cognisance of the mode of production. Thus, the discourse of social change becomes from an idealist, philosophical exercise to one which works as a real palpable force and touches the vital areas of human existence – how people in a society produced things for the common good, how they related to one another and how at the same time they responded to the questions of social acceptability and desirability, conviction and commitment.

3.8 QUESTIONS

1. What does superstructure stand for in Marxist criticism? Also consider whether literature is an important part of superstructure.
2. Owners of the means of production resist social change at all levels – economic as well as political, ideological and cultural. Do you agree? Give a reasoned answer.

3.9 GLOSSARY

Ahistorical:	Outside of and away from history. The ahistorical attitude leads to abstraction and arbitrariness in discussion.
Cromwellian Revolution:	The great political assault led by the republican leader Oliver Cromwell on King Charles I in 1640. The fight encompassed the whole of English society. Following the revolution, England came to be ruled through a parliament by the commonwealth, a collectivity of modern progressive forces of money and productive power.
Misappropriation:	A loaded word. It indicates the unjust nature of surplus distribution under which socially produced surplus is wrongly snatched away by the individual entrepreneur. Under this arrangement, the actual producer, the factory worker, merely gets his wages, not a share in the produce.
Specificity:	Concreteness. A specific or concrete phenomenon has features of an actual happening that cannot be visualised in other circumstances or situations.

UNIT 4 COMMITMENT IN LITERATURE

Structure

- 4.0 Objectives
- 4.1 Introduction
- 4.2 Who is a Committed Writer?
- 4.3 The Committed View of Issues
- 4.4 The Committed and the Other View of the Same Phenomenon
- 4.5 Commitment and Tradition
- 4.6 The Theoretical Base
- 4.7 Literature as Education: Direct Interaction with Public
- 4.8 Let Us Sum Up
- 4.9 Questions
- 4.10 Glossary

4.0 OBJECTIVES

In this unit, let us:

- define and explain the role of a writer from the Marxist point of view
- elucidate, under this perspective, that literary writing assumes an activist political dimension
- and probe the theory behind committed writing.

4.1 INTRODUCTION

Till the middle of the nineteenth century, commitment did not figure as an issue in discussions about literature. It need not have. Every important writer till that time showed keen interest in the affairs of society and adopted a clear approach to the problems of the day. The Romantics, for instance, shared with the readers their disgust and hatred for the ways of city life which they found artificial and narrow. Disturbed and anguished as the Romantics remained, they aspired for an existence that was simple, natural and spontaneous. Their rejection of 'reason,' the faculty that set much store by planning and conscious effort, and preference for 'imagination' indicated a sharp sense of critique about the surrounding reality. For them, 'imagination' countered all this and enabled man to see "the life of things," as Wordsworth put it. No wonder that the established and entrenched interests in culture as well as society did not take kindly to the Romantics and ignored their assertions. On their side, the Romantics did not care. See whether modern writers have the same kind of attitude towards their society.

However, things changed drastically in the latter half of the nineteenth century from what they were earlier. In the first decade of the twentieth century and later, the English writer began drawing the line between the social and individual, between that which could be shared with the reader on the basis of common interests and that which the writer felt and thought only individually. That the individual thought and feeling could also typify the thought or feeling of a group in a society remained outside the purview of the twentieth century writer. The studies of the working of the human mind done in the latter half of the nineteenth century may have contributed to this development. Is this a correct guess? In my opinion, it is not merely that psychology as a new branch of knowledge influenced the writer and made him/her delve deep in the mind and consciousness of people. In the first place, is it not possible that psychology itself as an independent area of study had its origin in the way the nineteenth century writers, particularly those who wrote in the thirties, forties and fifties, understood and interpreted their experience? This is borne by the fact that a large part of nineteenth century English literature is full of representations with the

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psychological dimension as a most determining aspect of behaviour. No, the difficulty with the early twentieth century English literature is that it poses issues in opposition to society, not as situated within it.

4.2 WHO IS A COMMITTED WRITER?

There are very few committed writers in twentieth century English literature. By "committed" writers I mean those who consciously and effectively draw the attention of the reader towards injustice, exploitation and oppression in society through their writing and provide a rational-critical dimension to their representations in literature. Committed writing has the power to involve readers as participants in their own problem-ridden environment as well. And the few committed writers we have with us such as Bernard Shaw (1856-1950), for instance, are either kept out of critical discourse or treated by entrenched interests in the academic world with excessive scepticism. But, in the first place, what do we understand by a committed writer?

In my view, a committed writer assigns great importance to the historical context and situates his themes in the middle of significant developments of his time. I know that "historical context" and "significant developments" are big words but it is these that relate meaningfully to the life of the common people. The historical context makes difficult things comprehensible to the readers and tells them that they are products as well as producers of history. Again, it is the historical context that adequately explains the phenomenon of a period by linking up the phenomenon with the way human beings live in their particular surroundings. Human beings as "products of circumstances" would be readily accepted as a correct formulation. But how are they producers? This has been explained earlier in this block as a fundamental point of Marxism. The writing is committed in the sense that it is informed by a distinctive historical approach according to which the ordinary people decisively contribute towards social production because of which they develop a stake in an appropriate running of the social process. It is history – the changing and evolving (not static) conditions of existence – that makes us conscious of the importance of ordinary people in society.

Looked at differently, the ordinary people are in fact not ordinary but the most productive and, therefore, the most extraordinary. What would happen if we change our viewpoint so radically? Such a viewpoint is bound to make us rethink our parameters of criticism. What I mean is that commitment in literature is a question of attitude to one's society – its structure and organisation. If we place ourselves in opposition to the forces of our day, our commitment would reflect itself as a distinct mode of behaviour. This would indicate also a highly conscious act on the writer's part. Here, the word 'conscious' assumes added significance because the writer evolves for himself/herself in his/her surroundings a role vis-à-vis the people among whom s/he lives. Many a time, this induces writers to openly propagate their views through poems, plays and novels. A clear propensity for propaganda through literature emerges in times of social turmoil in which the poor exploited masses agitate to secure social and political rights. At such a time, committed writers decide to merge their voices with those of the large mobilised masses. In the act of representing the people's mood, committed writers also use specific literary devices (comedy, rhetoric) to give a fillip to popular urges. The process may generate a different kind of popular literature than we notice in ordinary peaceful times.

4.3 THE COMMITTED VIEW OF ISSUES

I reiterate that the question of commitment in literature is closely connected with the writer's consciousness, his/her conscious attitude towards the society of the time. In the twentieth century, this conscious adoption of attitude as a guiding principle threatens a large chunk of writers and critics unlike in the past. For instance, how should we look upon the fact of World War I? Was it a war that brought out the hero

in man by placing challenges before him and did it inspire a whole society or country to wage struggle for the preservation or upholding of certain values? Certainly not. We do not remember it as a war in this old sense. Most thinkers and writers agree that World War I was fought by the economically powerful sections in each country that were involved in it for the preservation and promotion of their own limited interests. As we would see, the primary purpose of these powerful sections was a share in the world trade that existed and flourished in the colonies. Did they keep in mind the well being of the people in those countries? It appears that interests of the populace in colonies were not of any concern for imperialist nations in pursuance of their plans. In the first place, the deciding authority in the case of each country was the economically strong section of people whose eye was on the profits that the imperialistic structure generated on the world scale. Obviously, these sections would not be swayed by the humanistic consideration of love and fellow feeling among the people in their country, their sole consideration being the narrow profit motive. It is also clear that the majority of citizens of the warring nations, both men and women, have no say in the matter of fighting wars that involve destruction of life and resources on a vast scale. The interesting thing is that the eventual sufferers in this tragedy are not only those who join the army and become cannon fodder on the battlefield or their families and friends but also those countless others who inhabit the backward and underdeveloped colonised world. That is why the words used about World War I by even liberal historians and analysts were "senseless destruction," "irrational clash of interests," "cynical pursuit of power," etc. However, this destruction, ironically, helped industry and trade flourish still more in the victorious nations. Needless to assert that this 'progress' and success in economy would work to the detriment of the colonies in a yet more ruthless manner in the years to come. This is how the committed writer may have viewed the phenomenon previous to his/her activist intervention in society through literature.

4.4 THE COMMITTED AND THE OTHER VIEW OF THE SAME PHENOMENON

Here, I have presented in brief a version of World War I. I call this version broadly humanist. The view behind this version is quite sympathetic towards the interests of the poor and weak in the European nations as well as the whole of what we call the third world today. In this context, the second question relates to the preservation and upholding of values by literature in a general way. Most writers of the twentieth century, irrespective of the class to which they belonged or with which they sympathised, found World War I senseless, appalling and worse. This was a sort of assertion of protest and criticism on their part. Sometimes, it came in the form of foregrounding intimate love between individuals the Nobel Prize winning American writer Hemingway, living under the threat of death. Love and death became the central features of this discourse, which did not know of the actual clashes taking place in the modern world. Blinded by assaults from all sides, the modern writer clung to the idea of the individual which had nowhere to look for hope, neither in spreading a belief or message, in the loyalty to the country of their origin (that in the past translated into what can be called patriotism) nor the ideal of freedom and liberation. This could be said of the vision of Hemingway. In the case of D. H. Lawrence (1885-1930), the critique assumed the form of a wholesale attack on industrialism as such which to the uncritical eye was a strong factor behind the malaise among men and women in the modern world. Yet another example of protest was the sweeping rejection of the world as a place which had become barren, beastly and vulgar, devoid of faith in and bonding with the will of God (T. S. Eliot, 1888-1965). As a reaction to the phenomenon of World War I, this writing did make some sense. But did it go into the real causes of the War and see that certain sections of society – the upper strata – were directly to blame for the happening of this colossal destruction? My contention is that such an understanding World War I, as was reflected in the modernist writing in spite of sounding dramatic and spectacular, was erroneous since it took its specific stand in abstract, ahistorical terms, its terms of

reference being "mankind," "world," "industrialism," "faith," etc. Nowhere did this critique, if it can truly be called a critique, refer to the actual history that had unfolded itself after the nineteenth century as an imperialistic dimension of capitalism. That is why, as far as the typical modernist twentieth century writer is concerned, World War I was a result of things other than imperialist-capitalist interests.

See what I mean. The nineteenth century writer had finally realised that the norms and principles cherished by him/her were threatened by a structure that was driven by the laws of capitalism. This explained why nineteenth century English writers were able to offer a sound critique of the active interests under capitalism and produce works of great literary merit. On the other hand, the twentieth century writer did not relate important social developments to capitalism. The question is, why? My answer is that a number of twentieth century writers lacked commitment and did not engage themselves with the issues of the day.

4.5 COMMITMENT AND TRADITION

The comment about twentieth century English writing could go still further, to suggest that the new writer, who wrote around the World War I, years had deliberately changed his/her strategy of action in literature, that s/he had resolved not to point an accusing finger at capitalism in its imperialist phase. Instead, as a carrier and representative of this new capitalism, s/he decided to oppose all that went in the name of renaissance humanism, scientific thought and rational outlook. In consequence, s/he severed all connection with the great realistic tradition of eighteenth and nineteenth century literature.

Keeping this in view, I wish to make two points about the practice of the twentieth century writers – one, that they do not meaningfully relate with the development of values and principles in English literature since the renaissance; and two, that they do not assign any important cultural role to the writer in the twentieth century, thereby reducing the writer to the level of an ineffectual entity in society. In fact, the two are connected since a link with the secular traditions as well as the strong sense of protest in English literature would inevitably draw the writing in the twentieth century towards performing a meaningful social role. I also iterate that these two tendencies push literary activity to the periphery of society and that writing, bereft of a meaningful linkage with the common reader is allowed to become a commodity produced by the writer for consumption in the market today. This did not happen in the particular case I have cited, but on a general plane. Actually, such a phenomenon encourages impersonal trends in society to influence and determine the nature of writing.

Let us get our view of the evolution of English writing straight. The development of literature since the renaissance has been sharply along humanist lines at the core of which lies secular thought. Whether it is Marlowe, Shakespeare, Ben Jonson, Milton, Fielding, Walter Scott or Dickens, we clearly notice in English writing a preference for analysis, questioning, courageous and honest assessment of trends as well as a bold and powerful support for the cause of social liberation. English writing in the last four centuries, and particularly since the Cromwellian revolution, has without doubt confronted courageously the issues of religion and moral conduct. It has also not fought shy of fulfilling its responsibility towards the larger masses in society. Issues such as modernity, learning, morality and adventure have been subjected to close examination and answers have been evolved in the direction of a sane pragmatic response. English writing of this period has also projected, particularly in the nineteenth century, the subject of inequality between the male and female of the human species under the governing principle of exploitation and patriarchy. Maggie and Dorothea in George Eliot (in *The Mill on the Floss* and *Middlemarch* respectively) reach the workable realisation that they have to put up with the challenges and pressures of the time till better conditions emerged. Their predecessor

Catherine Earnshaw in Emily Bronte (*Wuthering Heights*) and successor Tess in Thomas Hardy's novel of the same name symbolise great womanly courage and resistance. On the whole, we can see these renaissance humanist values of protest, courageous conduct and individual assertion evolving in the English writing of the last four centuries. Could we not relate them meaningfully to the historical development of productive forces and social classes at one end and the will to change among human beings at the other? A large segment of twentieth century English writing seems to have lost sight of this strong tradition of progressive humanist literature in England. An alternative committed paradigm of literature could take inspiration from this tradition in order to expose and attack a highly restrictive environment.

4.6 THE THEORETICAL BASE

This is one way of making sense of our past for the purpose of contributing toward the growth and development in our society. This directly links us to the idea of an active agent in a given environment. That is how committed writing comes to grasp its tradition and inheritance. The idea can be raised further to the level of a collective activity in which a society as a whole is visualised as constructing a past for its particular use. If there were a strong literary movement in twentieth century England, it would have looked at its rich and glorious past in a manner different than the modernist writers did. In this context, could we not take guidance from the idea of what a contemporary critic Jerome McGann in *Rethinking Historicism, Critical Readings in Romantic History* (Marjorie Levinson, et al., p.106) has called 'Difference' and 'Change.' McGann expects the writer to subvert his literary environment by placing inconvenient hurdles in the way of accepted norms. To quote: "When we read, we construct our histories, including our futures. In our day, poetry's special contribution to that process – poetry's special form of 'reading' – comes as a set of complicating and undermining procedures. Calling into question all that is privileged, understood and given including itself, this poetry operates under the signs of Difference and, most especially, of Change." In this quote, we have only to replace 'poetry' with literature to internalise the idea of a committed writer's role in his or her environment as well as in the self-correcting and self-evolving exercise of a participatory intelligence.

This would obviously have no meaning for the typical modernist English writer who worked merely to make his/her experience and state of mind known to the reader and in the process moved inexorably away from where the action was to the margins of history. This apart, the modernist writer failed entirely in his/her effort to broaden and universalise that which was narrowly individual, for the simple reason that s/he believed history to be impersonal, oppressive and non-changing. This prevented the modernist writer from forging an alliance with the evolving and developing consciousness (of writers and writings of the past) and urged them to invent a highly abstract notion of time. Perhaps, the modernist writer was not adequately equipped to 'read' earlier literature. The activity involved what McGann has called "complicating and undermining procedures." We have to think how a new reading of past literature can be made difficult as well as questioning and inspiringly challenging. Acceptance of the old as it is gives us the habit of easy thinking. As a result of this, the writer may simply work with the ordinary tools of common sense. That is why "complicating procedures" are required so that a different view of things can be achieved. My contention is that this view is highly profitable and useful because it provides us a place in the tradition, which followed the significant rules and norms of human progress, as well as a role under which we carry that tradition forward. See, how difficult the task of committed writing is! The early twentieth century writer chose, in my opinion, the softer option of not putting to use "the complicating and undermining procedures" of reading, i.e. grasping and interpreting. Thus, s/he overlooked the relevance of the great humanist and secular tradition in English writing. Jerome McGann's comment rightly draws our attention to this fact. The

twentieth century modernist writer glossed over this significant connection with tradition and chose to stand alone as an entity outside time and history. That is why his criticism of events such as World War I lacked substance and solidity. It did not tell them what to do except that s/he should either fight a lonely battle or bear with and suffer the ignominy of modern existence. In fact, s/he did worse than this, as I have said above, when s/he deliberately argued against the idea of progress and movement in time, which as we know is a euphemism for history.

The second point concerns the role of a writer in society. I have given an explanation and a rationale at some length of this in the previous paragraph. Is a writer not supposed to tell his/her reader about the state in which the large masses of people find themselves, as also about how these people could respond to the prevalent pressures of economy, society and culture? One answer can be that a writer's job is only to share with the reader the general mood of helplessness, despondency and disgust and that s/he should leave the rest of the matter to the reader's own devices. The modern writer does precisely this. The readers are left to fend for themselves with respect to solutions that they require to the pressing problems of the day. In fact, the reading of literature in the twentieth century helps only in duplicating, if not actually compounding the sense of alienation that people feel in their lives. Another answer can be that literature could provide a sharp awareness and understanding of the life-processes of the time when it is produced. While doing so, literary writing may focus upon the aspect of change in life. To committed writing, change alone would indicate the relevance of positive thought and intervention in society.

4.7 LITERATURE AS EDUCATION: DIRECT INTERACTION WITH THE PUBLIC

The committed writer in our time can locate those areas of existence where struggles are already taking place to transform the nature and quality of life. Do we not see people dissatisfied with the way the social structure suppresses their creative urge and compels them to merely carry out the dictates of the privileged sections in society? If properly channelised, this dissatisfaction can assume a strong political form. What I mean is that a writer can, if s/he is a conscious social entity, help the reader identify such centres of potential change and infuse in the reader an urge to participate in collective struggles. Unlike the first answer, which applied to the modern writer, an agent of individual-centred, apathetic and broadly cynical literary trend, this answer sheds an altogether different light upon the role and function of writing. Emphasizing the importance of active intervention, Frank Lentricchia in his book *Criticism and Social Change* has said that "I come down on the side of those who believe that our society is mainly unreasonable and that education should be one of the places where we can get involved in the process of transforming it" (p. 4). In this quotation, the reference to education is particularly meaningful since it brings the activity of a thinking person right into the social arena by placing a whole set of curious and inquisitive people in front of the interpreting individual in an act of sharing. Elaborating the Marxist approach, Lentricchia says further that "Knowledge is the production of classes, institutions, and disciplines, and the mode of production itself, not of isolated individuals" (p. 5). This is what can precisely be said of literature since insofar as the view of the committed writer is concerned, experiences also get produced within the ambit of the mode of production and what one has to make of it. In literature should also be based upon a general collective idea of its function as well as impact. At the same time, the act of the writer has also a close affinity with that of an educator. The materialist radical politics of such an act alone determines the extent to which literature attains its humanist appeal and transformative edge.

Let us take a glance at a still more activist view of committed writing. Bertolt Brecht's role could not but be that of a propagandist whose views were to influence the course of politics and history. Walter Benjamin rightly remarked that for Brecht, there was no gap or distinction between the stage and the audience because if we

recognised the gap, we would assign a passive role to the audience. According to Benjamin, Brecht considered the members of the audience real heroes who actively interacted with the happenings on the stage. Deeply committed to the cause of struggle against a mode of existence, the writer had to necessarily present characters as well as issues in such a way that the audience was compelled to rethink their ordinary notions about life and behaviour. Walter Benjamin has stated in his book *Understanding Brecht* that "Epic theatre takes as its starting point the attempt to introduce fundamental change into ... relationships (between stage and public, text and performance, producer and actor). For its public, the stage is no longer 'the planks which signify the world' (in other words, a magic circle), but a convenient public exhibition area. For its stage, the public is no longer a collection of hypnotised test subjects, but an assembly of interested persons whose demands it must satisfy. For its text, the performance is no longer a virtuoso interpretation, but its rigorous control. For its performance, the text is no longer a basis of that performance, but a grid on which, in the form of new formulations the gains of that performance are marked" (p. 2).

In this quotation, note that a radically different relationship has been visualised between the play or theatre and audience, something not as clearly understood in the past. Why does Benjamin say that the public is usually treated by the producer as "a collection of hypnotised test subjects"? Perhaps, he says this to disapprove of the practice under which the public watches a play to be merely offered entertainment as a commodity. The relationship in such a situation is of the consumer with the marketed good. In Benjamin's opinion, Brecht preferred an audience with an active mind out to interpret the behaviour of actors on stage according to the common requirements of actual men and women in society. One should apply this idea to the working of fiction and poetry in an environment and see whether readers of literature can also be treated with the same sense of equality, respect and importance as happened in the case of Brecht's theatre vis-à-vis the public. In fact, this is the essential aspect of committed writing where the producer of literature (writer) is bringing back to readers the awareness whose potentiality lies in the life-conditions of people themselves. Also consider that most of twentieth century English writing does not conform to this view. Instead, it seems active in the opposite direction where it pursues the plan of carving an independent path for the non-committed bourgeois writer. There is no doubt that the work of such a writer gets reduced to an uninvolved and individual-centred creative practice.

4.8 LET US SUM UP

Commitment in English literature has a long history. However, towards the end of the nineteenth century, a new writing trend called 'modernism' emerged. This trend is rooted in modern bourgeois ideology because of which it stood in opposition to progressive committed literature.

The committed writer recognised the importance of secular-scientific thought in history and clearly promoted those values in writing which suited the requirements of common people in a society. It also sought to reverse the relationship that had been established between the writer and reader in a market situation.

4.9 QUESTIONS

1. Comment on the significance of 'purpose' in literature. How does modernist writing look at the idea of purpose?
2. Do you agree that a major function of literature is to educate the public? How would committed writing defend itself against the charge of lacking in wider humanist and universalist appeal?

4.10 GLOSSARY

Commitment in
Literature

- Modernist:** Too rooted in the modern industrial phenomenon. It counterposes human experience with thought and lays almost exclusive stress on the former.
- Participatory Intelligence:** This is different from merely viewing a condition and refers to the mental act that aims at critiquing and changing the condition through active effort.
- Intervention:** The opposite of this is to see, learn and express. In the twentieth century, literary works in English have stayed away from the larger questions confronting mankind. The act of intervention in literature is based on the urge to show a clear dissatisfaction with the reigning trends and point out the basic reasons of the problems that have emerged.
- Difference and Change:** Terms of critical theory. These are used by the critic to infuse a sense of questioning in the reading of a text with the purpose of disturbing the given order of ideas or images in the text. Through the use of these, the critic's job becomes highly challenging and, therefore, fascinating.

UNIT 5 AUTONOMY IN LITERATURE

Structure

- 5.0 Objectives
- 5.1 Introduction
- 5.2 Materialist Parametres
- 5.3 Total Personality and Distinct Totality
- 5.4 Materiality in Literature
- 5.5 Structuralist Mode of Macherey's View
- 5.6 The General and Particular in Literature
- 5.7 Let Us Sum Up
- 5.8 Questions
- 5.9 Glossary

5.0 OBJECTIVES

In this unit we will:

- raise questions regarding the distinct 'undefinable' nature of literature and
- consider the debate in Marxist criticism on a literary work as product.

5.1 INTRODUCTION

What do we mean by autonomy in literature? As stated earlier in the block, literature as a phenomenon does not necessarily have a direct one-to-one relation with the economic or political situation of the time in which it is produced. This is to mean that a severe economic crisis and a totally fantasy-based, fairy tale-like literature can coexist – the former pressing the writer to take cognizance of mass deprivation and the latter choosing to create a wholly imaginary work of beauty and wonder. It is also possible that the literature of a period would depict helplessness or sense of insecurity among human beings in the midst of prosperity. The reason for this is that imaginative writing has its own peculiar history and tradition and its own peculiar ways to come to terms with them. As a consequence of this, the pressures of a period do not affect or determine writing in a simple manner. We would have noticed that at the level of language also, phrases idioms and expressions that writers of the previous era pioneered constitute a large part of a literary work. Add to this the fact that writers of a period interact and compete with one another in their own exclusive literary world (magazines, books, discussions, and seminars), away from the attention of the common people. All this happens as the writer is engaged in the act of writing. The ordinary reader is kept out of the purview of these 'behind the scene' practices of writers who remain divided into different groups, promoting or pulling down one another. This is one meaning of 'autonomy' in literature under which we take note of the imaginative phenomenon as a world of its own, away from obvious regulations and pressures of the environment in which it occurs.

In another sense, autonomy refers to the individual act of writing in which the writer constructs a poem, a novel or a play through a creative process not known to people active in philosophy or politics. This creative process sets the writer apart, along with the painter, sculptor or musician – all connected with fine arts. The creative process may elevate the writer's imagination to a different level altogether. The English Romantics talked a great deal about this in their critical writing. The writer's imagination becomes an arena of another kind that frees the creative mind from constraints of prejudice. Marx used the example of French novelist Balzac to show

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how a novelist presented society differently from the way he saw it in actual life. The orthodox Balzac, the supporter of the historically moribund feudal class in real life, was replaced by an extremely realistic Balzac in works of fiction such as *The Peasants*, *Old Goriot* and *Lost Illusions*. The obvious pressures of social belief were set aside in the act of writing where Balzac let the new social forces around him assume a distinct progressive character. Thus, Balzac's novels enjoyed autonomy from his own beliefs and prejudices to present a world of enormous literary significance. Marx ascribed the achievement to the honesty of Balzac as a writer. He used the phrase "triumph of realism" to underline Balzac's objective sense of appraisal as well as courage to depict reality the way it unfolded itself before his eyes at the time of writing. Thus, Marx laid the basis of what we call work-based or writing-centred critical analysis at the expense of life-based or biographical approach.

The word 'autonomy' signifies independent existence and working. The implication is that a thing or phenomenon has a life of its own with distinct laws that govern its functioning. Does the principle of autonomy apply to literature? In this unit, I shall consider some critical responses to this question. I shall also examine some manifestations of autonomy in contemporary literary thought. The discussion will naturally be accompanied by the viewing of a few problems associated with this question.

5.2 MATERIALIST PARAMETERS

It should be clear to one who has some acquaintance with Marxism that a work of literature should essentially be considered a product of its times, an expression of the pain and miseries, joys and celebrations of the period in which it was composed. However, in our century, this view has not found favour with a large section of critics. It is believed that art is independent of its immediate social pressures and transcends the boundaries of time and place. For these critics, it is the sharp and appealing, in many cases dazzling aspect of a literary work that catches the reader's attention irrespective of whether the reader belongs to the time in which the work was written or the ethos to which she or he belonged.

Most of the criticism in our time defines literature in terms of a superior meaning by consciously overlooking references to what is considered mundane. It is believed that ordinary details of reality in a situation, as captured in literature, detract from the essence of human conduct which is of a different quality and nature. According to this view, a representation becomes literature on the strength of the most intense aspect of the life that it has captured. It is this that is supposed to make it universal. To my mind, the fault in positing the issue this way lies in the division that is visualised between the time-linked and the autonomous nature of a work. In fact, Marxism provided in clear terms the materialist, as opposed to the idealist parameters to literature through establishing a link between the writing, the writer and the larger social life around both. You remove this link and our understanding of literature would go haywire.

5.3 TOTAL PERSONALITY AND DISTINCT TOTALITY

There is no doubt that the time-linked and independent aspects of literature form what can be called the "total personality" of a work or writer. In fact, the topicality of a work is never fully or exclusively topical, since a particular situation, however limited in scope, has a past as well as a future. The categories, therefore, that we make such as 'topical' and 'general' should not be taken in an absolute sense. However, we say that time-linked and independent aspects do not merely coexist in literature but are inseparable from each other. Generally, we miss out on the distinct totality produced by them through a peculiar fusion in a work. Hence, the wrong positing. Here, let us focus attention on a work's 'distinct totality,' another word for uniqueness.

Normally, as we know, a literary work appears unique, something that has no parallel outside itself. There is no problem with this except that it implies a mysterious working of factors within a work. But is the phenomenon actually mysterious? Can we not define the meaning and scope of a literary work in such a way that we relate ourselves to it and identify areas of common interest? To use critical theory jargon, can we not 'untie' a text or work in spite of its totality or total personality? To understand these, let us take help from a perceptive contemporary critic. To Lionel Trilling, the totality or total personality of a work "responds within the iron limits of laws and necessities, that these are formulable and that the artist must often use these formulations to achieve completeness of his response to the environment" (*Speaking of Literature and Society*, p.88). In this quotation, mark the words "iron limits of laws and necessities." Do they not refer to the social mode of production we have discussed in the previous pages? What Trilling has underlined here is that the specific social environment with its laws and other norms cannot be wished away and should, therefore, be accepted as a given reality. It is this reality in which we live and breathe. This constitutes the conditions of our existence. "Iron limits" is used by Trilling to indicate the discipline that a social structure at the level of laws imposes on literature. At the same time, "iron limits" are only of laws and necessities. See the dialectic. For instance, the moment we recognise the disciplining world as a phenomenon working in accordance with certain laws, we get a clue to its inner dynamics. The knowledge of laws can help us a great deal in understanding the nature of our world. Because of this knowledge, the iron limits become less restrictive. The world ceases to be what we call 'Fate,' something whose working is mysterious and, therefore, beyond us. This is the second point Trilling makes. He iterates that in history, which has its own dynamics based on human labour, the various phenomena should be seen as comprehensible and amenable to change. Since historical phenomena are comprehensible, the world of necessities and compulsions is within the realm of our grasp and should be interpreted as such. In Trilling's opinion, the writer's response gains in totality and completeness by a serious engagement with the real pressures of environment. The writer makes an effort to understand his/her world.

According to Trilling, the writer's formulations about the world assist him/her in a big way to make connections between various segments of society and reality. Through this effort, the writer gains an idea of his/her world as completeness and a whole. Words such as "totality," "completeness" and "wholeness" in Trilling's argument underline the artistic effort whose chief motive is to attain a meaningful response.

5.4 MATERIALITY IN LITERATURE

In what form should we visualise a literary work? Should it be taken as a crystallised response through language to a period in history, something that is rooted in a situation and because of which it has attained a solid and materialised form? I have used the words "solid" and "materialised" with the purpose of asserting that a literary work has these because of the actual and specific state in which we encounter it. There are obvious advantages of accepting this description of a literary work. That is why we hear critics saying again and again that a work has a specificity of its own, that it is itself and nothing else – not the iron laws of society explained and exemplified nor cultural or ideological trends commented upon, whether accepted or refuted. I have in mind the view represented by New Criticism. But one can interpret this basic tenet of New Criticism from an altogether different approach and assert that literature enjoys a particular kind of autonomy. Does it not seem to go against Trilling's argument? This new view may suggest that most of the criticism, which talks of the central meaning, or message of a book is actually to do injustice and damage to the text whose character is inviolable. Instead, according to this view, we should see the work as it is in its specificity, in the role assigned to it by the author at the time of writing. Definitely, this is contrary to what New Criticism projected

where work is torn away from its author as well as its time of writing. Explaining the term 'specificity,' the French Marxist critic Pierre Macherey says:

"What do we mean when we talk of the specificity of the literary work? First, that it is irreducible, that it cannot be assimilated into what it is not. It is the product of a specific labour, and consequently cannot be achieved by a process of a different nature. Furthermore, it is the product of a rupture, it initiates something new. If we have properly grasped this quality of novelty we will not *confuse* the work with what is extrinsic to it, we will want to distinguish it emphatically from what surrounds it.

The specificity of the work is also its autonomy: in so far as it is self-elaborating it is a law unto itself and acknowledges only an intrinsic standard, an autonomous necessity. This is why literary works ought to be the object of *a specific science*: otherwise they will never be understood. And though various disciplines such as linguistics, the theory of art, the theory of history, the theory of ideologies, the theory of unconscious formations, must all collaborate in this enterprise – for without them it would remain incomplete and would perhaps be impossible – yet they can in no sense replace this specific science of the literary work" (Author's emphasis. *A Theory of Literary Production*, pp. 51-52).

Note the organisation of this argument. The first three assertions are in the negative mode – "irreducible," "cannot be assimilated," "what it is not." The third assertion is extended to a different process happening in a different place or time through which the specific labour of a product cannot be achieved. The idea "what it is not" is further repeated when "something new" (not old), "what is extrinsic" and "what surrounds it" are brought in. Obviously, Macherey, in total disagreement with the way criticism has hitherto conducted itself in the realm of literary discussion, has launched a full-scale attack on the prevalent critical modes that swear by essence, meaning, assimilation into general culture and the surrounding environment. These latter, in Macherey's opinion, deny to a literary work its very character and appeal. They force their logic on it to prove that it is a mere example of how life has already been constituted.

But this also indicates a few positive ideas. For example, Macherey calls the work a product. What are the theoretical implications of this? In my opinion, a product should be understood in terms of a conscious action performed to meet a particular requirement. In this sense, Macherey seems to critique earlier descriptions of literature, such as reflection, expression and representation. The idea gets further problematised when Macherey combines 'product' with 'novelty.' What he means is that the product, in its act of production, becomes something new, a phenomenon that denotes the active involvement of human creative labour – that of the writer in this specific case. In Macherey's view, the creative labour of the writer is not the aggregate of the materials surrounding him/her but something new and different.

5.5 STRUCTURALIST MODE OF MACHEREY'S VIEW

Once Macherey has clarified the negative parametres of the case, he proceeds to lay down the thesis of a *specific science*. Here, 'specific' stands for that which belongs to literature alone and is useful in that particular area. What does the word 'science' mean in this context? The question assumes significance since our view has so far been that science – the precise world of experiment and analysis – should be kept out of the literary-critical discourse. Macherey, on the other hand, wishes to exclude the subjective element, the reader's own preferences that disturb the internal order of a work. The critic or reader should see the work as it is, as a reflection through the working of words of the response the writer gives to his/her environment. In this sense, the critic should 'consciously' avoid the intrusion of his/her own biases and

presuppositions. This 'self-conscious' element in Macherey's argument should be borne in mind. However, in this part of the statement, Macherey makes a different kind of reference to the various theories – of linguistics, history, etc. – which he finds useful for the understanding of a literary work. According to Macherey, these theories should be applied to the work for the purpose of revealing the unique meaning the work embodies. Nonetheless, at the end Macherey returns to the negative mode to state that theories "can in no way replace this specific science of the literary work," their job being to only help the critic gauge the constructed meaning of the work.

The most important words in the latter part of Macherey's statement are "self-elaborating," "law unto itself" and "intrinsic standard." What does Macherey mean by them? Does he suggest that on one side, you are allowed to use whichever theories you like to understand a work, while on the other you should desist from violating the laws, which the work has evolved within itself to become what it has become? Yes, the word is 'violate.' Never ever violate the intrinsic worth of a work. Macherey, in fact, suggests this and pinpoints the authenticity as well as validity of critical enterprise. For him, this does not in any way go against the inner virtue of the literary work. But the fear is that it might, since it is possible for the critic to expect *a priori* the expression or assertion of a particular meaning from the work under consideration. Thus, we see that Macherey's argument goes totally against the critic's subjectivity. At the same time, according to Macherey, there is an intrinsic standard in a work that assigns proportion and value to its constituents within its totality. In sum, Macherey advocates the use of different available theories (not subjective, irrational preferences) to ascertain and recognise the truth of a work that is inseparable from its wholeness and specificity. Viewed closely, it makes sense because a literary work is to be given as much respect and independence as enjoyed by critical endeavour.

How do we interpret and evaluate Macherey's argument about the autonomy of a literary work? Is this a general argument useful in literary theory at all times? I am not sure. My doubt rests on the fact that literary theory or criticism has been seen to perform different functions at different times in history. For instance, there have been situations, as in eighteenth century England, in which criticism asked writers to provide works of social use. In other situations, it has ruthlessly attacked those who failed to adhere to the idea of artistic and aesthetic norms. A whole stream of early Marxist criticism was prescriptive, telling writers to focus upon what it thought to be the important themes. Therefore, Macherey, too, should be understood in his specific cultural context of post-Second World War Europe. I feel that Macherey apprehends a great threat from the contemporary capitalist world to the intrinsic value of a work of art. The modern world with its powerful ideological weapons (the newspaper, film, and television) threatens to reduce any given thing, however distinct, human and unique, to a commodity. What would happen if this venture was successful? Secondly, capitalism through this act of reducing art to the status of a thing kills the vital being and spirit of productive labour. Have I not implied all along that literature was a form of creative-productive labour? This is the inherent contradiction. You can understand the result of productive labour in its irreducible, actual aspect. However, if you impose upon it, the new cultural product, the *a priori* logic of the already existing world, you would fail in the effort since the new product with its inherent standard and life would not be turned into what it is not. In this way, Macherey expects of literary criticism to protect and preserve the dignity and materiality of art. Needless to say, in this act a decisive blow is dealt to the bourgeois productive process of the modern world. By assigning such a vital role to criticism, Macherey underpins the high aesthetic and political significance of committed literary thought.

Apart from what I have said in the preceding paragraph, what should be our response, particularly in terms of theory, to Macherey's standpoint regarding the inherent inviolable nature of art? My answer to the question would be that Macherey's view of the literary work is too deeply entrenched in the structuralist mode which sees

literature as a finished product with a shape and form that is final. Under this mode, a literary work has structures, which are difficult to interfere with, and that the writer wrestles with these structures in the act of writing. Is this not the inherent suggestion in 'specificity'?

Macherey would never see a work in active operation with different parts enjoying a looseness of connection with one another and impacting separately or together depending on the requirements of a given society. In Macherey's view, a work cannot be moulded according to one's whims and fancies. There is also the implication that the solidity of a work is itself political – it refuses to be subsumed by the surrounding world. Instead, it stands on its own as a comment, a response, a representation. Macherey has this stubborn nature of art in mind. But great art is also of sound cultural use for the masses who see in it a crystallisation of their own indomitable spirit and who construct with the help of such art their own liberationist dreams in the wider arena of social discourse, as in theatre. Macherey's concept of 'solidity' denies to the literary work a flexibility and mobility that merges in different ways with the politics of a time. Works are changed, modified and adapted to suit specific requirements of another period. Under Macherey's scheme, such a thing is unthinkable. Would you agree with this criticism of Macherey's viewpoint?

5.6 THE GENERAL AND PARTICULAR IN LITERATURE

At the obvious level, there seems to be a gap, if not a contradiction between the points made by Trilling and Macherey. Before we take it up, let us have a look at another view of autonomy. I refer to the view of Georg Lukacs who understands literature as having a general and particular aspect at the same time. Lukacs is one of the early Marxist critics equipped with a close and focused study of Marxist thought. According to him, literature is part of a larger socio-historical phenomenon and owes its significance to a particular outlook that it has adopted to interpret its environment. What this means is that from its superstructural position, literature performs the role of a realistic representation and that the extent of significance a work has gained lies in its being more or less realistic. Then, Lukacs unveils the laws of realism in literature, as distinct from those in history and suggests that literature's realism constitute deeper humanism, than does the particular situation in history or society that produced it. The reason given by Lukacs to buttress this point is that literature steers clear of ordinary naturalist details of life and achieves concentration of description through the use of imagined or invented devices. Does this violate the laws of realism? Lukacs's answer is in the negative since according to him literature follows its own logic of representation. I emphasise "its own" to indicate that in Lukacs's view, too, specificity has an important place. But is it the same as put forward by Macherey? Lukacs's case is moderately stated. To me, it seems that Lukacs is a votary of the original stand of Marx who used the phrase "relative autonomy" for superstructures. Consider whether cultural superstructure – the realm in which, according to Marx, literature moves – also has "relative autonomy." Should "autonomy" and "relative autonomy" be used interchangeably?

In Trilling's quotation given above, the expression "complete response" was related to the author who represented in his/her work his/her environment in a comprehensible way. For the author, this comprehensibility was achieved through the activity of his highly critical mind. The author sees significant connections and linkages between people and their surroundings. For instance, an act of atrocity is not the same for an author. S/he can 'read' the atrocity in context and may come to the conclusion that the atrocity is in fact not an isolated phenomenon but something that is symptomatic of the society as a whole. My example is that of a writer's response to a situation seen as a symptom of something called "society as a whole." Trilling has asserted that it is the writer's endeavour that has imparted a wholeness or totality to a literary work. From this, it can be deduced that for Trilling, a literary work is the

response – moral, spiritual or political – of a writer captured in the totality of a work. If we accept this, we will draw upon the writer's role in his/her society. Keeping this in mind, a large part of literary theory refers to the times of the author and seeks clues to the moral or artistic intentions of the work from the assistance that such a reference provides. Trilling's view can also lead us to the idea that the writer's totalised response may not strike a sympathetic chord in the critic's mind whose own 'totalised' response to the writer's times may be at variance with it. In such a case, critical discussion would centre on the difference between the two responses, and the critic's assessment and evaluation of a work.

Does literature mean the same thing to us as it does to the reader in a western industrialised society? Are we in a position, with meagre cultural resources at hand, to accept literature as an independent totality, a solid structure and a specific formation? I am not sure that we can afford to see literature as that kind of autonomous entity that Trilling or Macherey talk about. In our case, literature may be considered a subversive cultural activity. To cite an example, it is unthinkable for us to keep early twentieth century political developments, the different phases of the Nationalistic Movement in India, away from the considerations of modern Indian literature. One would be hard put to explain that theatre, fiction and poetry during the National Movement in India merged their identities with the liberationist politics of the time. It was certainly not a sign of underdevelopment in our culture and society that literary works sacrificed during the National Movement their specific structures and totalities. In consequence, they successfully met the requirements of the period. However, the same cannot be said of literature's role in our post-National Movement scenario when academic institutions have come forward in a big way to assert the need of debating literature's artistic and aesthetic aspects. Where has this led? My suspicion is that our academic institutions have in the process moved away from where change is taking place. Does this tell us something problematic and disturbing about the cultural centres in the west? Call it marginalisation of literature, if you like.

5.7 LET US SUM UP

This unit is meant primarily to raise questions pertaining to literature as an independent art form. Autonomy as an important issue in Marxist literary criticism has been in debate only in the latter half of the twentieth century. This is in spite of the fact that the nineteen thirties saw a renewed interest in questions of art, literary merit and autonomy in Germany, France and Russia where dissenting critical voices emerged on a big scale. But the thirties were a period of political turmoil in Europe as well as the rest of the world. The discovery of Marx's early writings had led to a different interpretation of ideology, commodity, labour, human endeavour, alienation, consciousness, etc. at this time. The critical dissent in Marxist literary criticism is centred around the rather abstract and mechanistic view that literature should be seen as a reflection of reality than as a product of the creative labour of human beings. Marx's early writings – *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, *German Ideology* and *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* explored the philosophical dimension of human endeavour in a capitalist environment and replaced the earlier emphasis on social reality with the writer's creative struggle for conceiving and constructing an artistic totality. Three distinct lines of argument have emerged in this debate on literature's independence and autonomy. However, all three derive their meaning from the complex formation of circumstances in which a writer is active and in which his/her work attains a concrete shape. The question is far from resolved even today, particularly in view of the likely intervention of an author out to consciously work upon and mould the consciousness of the larger masses. We in the third world cannot make much of this debate because literature for us has to be a vehicle of views, values and responses in the midst of a world attacked ideologically by the well-oiled academic machinery of modern bourgeoisie.

5.8 QUESTIONS

1. How far do you consider literature independent of the surroundings in which it is produced? Give an example to illustrate your answer.
2. Discuss the relationship between the author and his/her work in the light of the argument of autonomy.

5.9 GLOSSARY

- A priori:** Something given and preconceived. *A priori* assumptions remain unaware of the possibilities of change, and fail to comprehend things in their novelty.
- Literary production:** Radically different from 'creation' and 'expression.' Under 'literary production,' we can better understand the genesis and nature of literary writing. The concept can also take the discussion into the realm of sociology – factors in a specific setting that governed the formation of a literary work or trend.
- Necessity:** This refers to the constraints of social environment which have to be accepted as what Marx calls 'conditions of existence.' The more we know about the world of necessity, the better will our chances be of overcoming or changing it.
- Relative autonomy:** A much-discussed phrase in Marxist thought. It is supposed to stand dialectically between 'fate' and idealism, critiquing both from the materialist standpoint.

UNIT 6 LITERATURE AND IDEOLOGY

Structure

- 6.0 Objectives
- 6.1 Introduction
- 6.2 What do 'Class Society' and 'Class Ideas' Signify
- 6.3 Generating Ideology through 'Neutral' Apparatuses
- 6.4 Role and Function of Ideology in Literature
- 6.5 How are Most Ideologies Deficient
- 6.6 Ideology in Operation in a Literary Work: Theory
- 6.7 Ideology in Operation in a Literary Work: Example
- 6.8 Let Us Sum Up
- 6.9 Questions
- 6.10 Glossary

6.0 OBJECTIVES

In this unit we shall attempt to:

- explain the class nature of ideas and show how ideas become active in social environment as more or less organised systems.
- consider how an ideology shapes a literary work
- conversely, how in the process of writing an ideology evolves and gets moulded by the pressures of social environment
- enunciate that ideology is linked up with the politics of a period.

6.1 INTRODUCTION

In the twentieth century, there has been a great deal of emphasis on 'isms.' These 'isms' are ideologies – the outlooks of different classes in a society — the way classes or groups of people make sense of or comprehend the reality of their time.

An 'ism' implies consistency in thought under which different perceptions and ideas of people are not isolated from and independent of one another. They connect and cohere with one another and fall into a pattern. This means that even when there is a good deal of variety as well as conflict or antagonism in people's responses, the element of agreement and sameness emerges as a governing principle under an 'ism'. By offering a perspective, this sameness compels experiences to move towards a general totalised view. This is where the concept of class comes in – people may be individuals as separate identities but under a trend in production and distribution, they merge into a collective identity called class. Unlike individuals, members of a class have a general shared outlook. What do we make of an individual-centred, self-oriented approach, one that thinks of social good as irrelevant? Such an approach may be characterised as bourgeois since it embodies the *sameness* of bourgeois behaviour, the connecting thread between all those members of a class who are driven by individual profit motive alone.

Each social phenomenon has two aspects to it – of the immediate situation that compels people to conform so that society can go on in its traditional way and the broader potential of change that is in-built in the mode of production. As should be obvious, the immediate situation impels the members of a group to remain passively acquiescent in the existing arrangement that would promote their common sectional or class interests. If these members fail to adopt that general, time-tested opinion and decided to act on individual, whims, they would land themselves in trouble. Much of the infight in classes causes this kind of problem and weakens the fabric of the class involved. Ideology steps in at this stage and tells people to think together

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The aspect of potentiality of change is more general and relates to a longer period, sometimes spanning decades. In history, there are periods of stagnation and slow growth, periods in which the newly emerged class is not strong enough to influence the course of events to its advantage. On the other side, the ruling group consolidates itself through various means available to it and thus, envelops the whole society in its perspective of production. The attempt at consolidation by a class also signifies an apprehension on its part of a possible threat to its control of society. Or else, why or against what should it consolidate its hold over society? Surely, the forces of change in the mode of production being constantly active, the fear of an upheaval are nascent at all times. In the process of living and operating in a world as ordinary people, we become part of an activity that signifies protest and transformation. As explained, the protest is initially muted. The slower the pace of this movement, the more stifled we feel by it. Some of us, particularly those among us whose stakes are not high in movement towards change, gradually fall in line and accept it as our fate. In the bargain, our critical faculty turns dull. The irony is that our acceptance of circumstance is deemed mature behaviour, not incapacity to see the elements of change in our surroundings. To us, a 'mature' and, therefore, wise person would be one who has imbibed the traditional outlook. Behind the idea of circumstance and the notion of wisdom can be seen the working of an ideology at a relatively higher level. Let us consider an assertion of crucial importance here. It relates to the view that all societies are class societies, that they are constituted of a group which controls the means of production and rules over the structure and their other which is ruled and governed in all respects, suppressed and exploited in a multiplicity of ways by the former. An acceptance of this view would force us to radically rethink our own positions today as members of the middle class in a former colony.

6.2 WHAT DO 'CLASS SOCIETY' AND 'CLASS IDEAS' SIGNIFY?

According to Marxism, all societies so far have been class societies – societies dominated by one or the other exploiting class. Centrally, this domination has been described as economic. Interestingly, a ruling group always considers itself honest and truthful and, therefore, born to enjoy the luxuries and comforts of life as well power and privilege that society gives to it. There is a whole set of reasons and arguments that can be marshalled by it to prove that it is the rightful heir to the bounties of life. The ruling group may argue that after all, the social arrangement, the law, the policies, the instruments of state, etc. give equal opportunities to all citizens, and those who work harder on plans sanctioned by the given structure succeed in winning benefits. If others do not work hard, so the argument goes, they must be lazy, less motivated and defunct. According to this way of thought, sustained hard work, honest endeavour and focused activity pays. Look around and see that ruling classes in modern societies invariably propagate and actually believe in the fact that they enjoy the fruits of their own labour in a society that allows equal opportunities to all to take benefit from hard work and enterprise. With the label of 'hard work' and 'honest dealing' on their souls, the ruling classes of the modern period emphatically preach the gospel of equal opportunity, freedom, human rights and democratic functioning. With morality on their side, these ruling classes also indulge in religious preaching, cultural projection and social expansion through a great deal of manipulative planning – preaching and projection of any kind that requires resources and organised effort in the modern-day world. Such is the case that preaching as well as manipulative planning are an essential part of modern enterprise. In specific cases of social behaviour, the ruling classes of today promote national chauvinism (my nation, my culture is superior to yours), racism (whites are civilised unlike the non-whites who are savages), casteism (upper castes have the capacity to think and fight while the lower castes are there to produce and serve) and gender inequality (women's job is to provide a stable home and beautiful environment and set standards of harmony, sweetness and feminine charm) in the name of faith and belief. Long treatises and dissertations can be produced by able minds to uphold the veracity of

these myths. Do we not see today the industry of myth-construction flourishing as never before? For the ruling sections, rational methods and analysis merely become useful weapons with which to further and uphold the cause of social enterprise. Over a period of time, the whole process gets unified to become what we call the ruling class ideology of today with its set of beliefs, normative ideas and values.

Do ordinary people in a class society think or feel differently with their own peculiar notions of morality, ethics and spiritualism? Broadly speaking, the feelings, thoughts and responses of the ordinary masses are moulded by the ideas of those who wield social power. We notice all along that in spite of acute frustration in a given circumstance, ordinary people seldom look towards the real cause – the unequal conditions in society. Instead, they construct the concept of fate as an agency that is supposed to control their destinies and compel them to live in penury. The other concept of forbearance as a virtue is scarcely useful to comprehend or explain the tangible conditions of life. The concept of forbearance, for all one knows, may have been forged by those who explain their good luck and prosperity not upon the idea of exploitation (which is the case) but upon that of help and support from a divine agency. In their opinion, inequality is God-given. Peculiarly, however, the rich and poor receive their guidance from God in equal measure, particularly with reference to the abstract capability of love, revenge or hatred, which are present as determining qualities in all human beings. It is a different matter that the recognition of abstract love in all human beings helps in joining socially unequal sections (it is all very useful for the rulers) and blunts the dissatisfaction of the underprivileged. The spread and propagation of love is patronised by the ruling agencies for this reason. Ironically, the area of culture becomes the chief carrier of love and friendship among all human beings – whether rich or poor. Conversely, hatred blind rage and sense of revenge also appear as equally shared by all.

6.3 GENERATING IDEOLOGY THROUGH 'NEUTRAL' APPARATUSES

Even when a dominant economic structure generates an ideology in accordance with its requirements, it does not always do so in a planned or even visible way. Thus, ideological phenomena should be seen as specific emergences to be considered and studied concretely. For instance, love for religion, nation or race at a given time cannot be directly related to an economic structure even when a few connections exist between the two. An ideology is a highly active component of life and it partly produces and energises itself through its own inner dynamic. This inner dynamic makes it appear class-neutral. Therefore, we have to comprehend its genesis and operations carefully with an eye upon the way different institutions work in a society. Althusser has drawn our attention to the invisible way in which ideology functions in a society, particularly under state patronage and in areas which are considered safe and neutral. These ideologies appear in the garb of secular practice and are accepted by us as the most natural conditions of modern existence. The danger of these ideologies lies in the fact that none of the people including members of the ruling class remains uninfluenced by them. Althusser cautions us about their all-determining power and demands of us to radically rethink their role and function. In Althusser's scheme of things, the two contending classes in a society do not oppose each other face to face. Instead, they carry on their mutually antagonistic activity through specific agencies. He suggests, therefore, that we should recognise the existence of neutral-looking structures in society in their actual working and examine their role from the point of view of human freedom. His argument is that deeply embedded social structures hide the oppressive face of ideology behind the mask of healthy rational conventions. His particular reference is to what he calls ideological state apparatuses. Giving an example of the institution of the school in a modern society (in whose larger pattern other social apparatuses work in tandem), Althusser says:

It takes children from every class at infant-school age, and then for years, the years in which the child is most vulnerable, squeezed between the family the state apparatus and the educational State apparatus, it drums into them, whether it uses new or old methods, a certain amount of 'know-how' wrapped in the ruling ideology (French arithmetic, natural history, the sciences, literature) or simply the ruling ideology in its pure state (ethics, civic instruction, philosophy). Somewhere around the age of sixteen, huge masses of children are ejected 'into production': these are the workers or small peasants. Another portion of scholastically adapted youth carries on: and for better or worse, it goes somewhat further, until it falls by the wayside and fills the posts of small and middle technicians, white collar workers, small and middle executives, petty bourgeois of all kinds. A last portion reaches the summit, either to fall into intellectual semi-employment, or to provide, as well as the 'intellectuals of the collective labourer,' the agents of exploitation (capitalists, managers), the agents of repression (soldiers, policemen, politicians, administrators, etc.) and the professional ideologists (priests of all sorts, most of whom are convinced 'laymen').

Here, ideology is thought of as a conditioning influence on an individual from the day s/he is born to the time when the individual is considered 'mature.' See how state apparatuses of a different kind (the school in this case) compel an individual to construct his/her psyche and mould the responses to meet the requirements of a well-entrenched invisible authority. Is the picture not horrifying that a set of structures founded and run by a modern state leaves no scope for a human being to think or feel on his/he. How are we to freely apply our mind to the various developments that emerge in society and on whose functioning depend our very existence? There is a good deal of truth in Althusser's assertion that most members of a developed society ('developed' should signify a capacity to examine and assess happenings from the point of view of freedom and dignified existence) are no different than "convinced lay men."

Of course, our knowledge of these apparatuses and their class links would give us the capacity to replace them with the ones that ensure freedom from ideological bondage and enslavement. The point is that a ruling class ideology operates at many levels and in many forms and people have to be extremely alert to see its real working. Literary writers deal with such a criss-cross of ideology-behaviour-writing interaction and become conscious of the many problems attending upon not just the conduct of ordinary people but also the practice of committed artists and writers. This means that the writer has to be wary of the pressures and influences operating in his/her society. At the same time, the realistic presence of ideological apparatuses in a representation could provide richness and density to the work and make the reader's endeavour of linking up details and envisioning a structure more satisfying and meaningful. Do many of the insights in Althusser's statement not get substantiated in our reading of Dickens's novels which reveal the way in which the nineteenth century English society suppressed its members cruelly and caused serious distortions in their behaviour?

6.4 ROLE AND FUNCTION OF IDEOLOGY IN LITERATURE

This takes us to the next question. What is the role and function of ideology in literature? Does it regulate or determine the act of writing so that the writer's observations and perceptions attain a comprehensible dimension? Also, can ideology come in the way of and obstruct literary writing? A common answer to these questions is that there definitely is an important way in which ideology and literature are related. The two do not merely coexist in the act of writing but also influence each other. In one way, an ideology, already formed in the mind of the writer in the course of living stands constantly challenged by certain new aspects of life that have

emerged on the scene. In many a case, these developments call them radical if you like, question the very notion of order and meaning in day-to-day existence. What should the writer do in such a situation? Should the writer allow the old ideology, with its grip on his/her consciousness, to oppose and negate the energy of the new trends by terming them dangerous to conventions? Or should one probe the factors that produced those trends?

We shall understand this idea of literature-ideology relationship better when not literature in general – poetry, drama, fiction or essay – but fiction in particular is focussed upon and considered. I do not want to go here into the question of why fiction gets this peculiar emphasis, but rather draw your attention to the fact that a large number of critics explain their notion of ideology with reference to novels. There is something in fiction because of which modern novelist Joseph Conrad (1857-1924) has remarked that “fiction is history, human history, or it is nothing.” See the paradox in Conrad’s assertion according to which fiction and history, the imaginary and real, are identical. Also note that Conrad talks of human history, something that human beings have produced with their efforts to pursue dynamic and progressive goals. Here, we see that fiction as human history is not and cannot be an aesthetic category under which the construction of internal harmony and beauty is important. Instead, it is a realistic category under which day-to-day occurrences, perceptions, ideas and beliefs as well as collective life-struggles are important. Of course, Conrad does not directly point towards ideology here. Still, the use of “human history” clearly indicates those acts and interventions through which men and women assert their common interests. A movement in human affairs in pursuit of social goals necessarily requires a unifying thought-process and ideology.

Roland Barthes broadly supports Conrad’s paradoxical idea about fiction as history in his comment on the nature of a literary work. In Barthes’s view, “The literary work is essentially paradoxical. It represents history and at the same time resists it.” In this comment, literary work and history are seen as distinct and inter-active. While the former stands for the text, the latter signifies a train of events, a process of change in time as well as those ideas and interpretations which combine seemingly scattered happenings into a totality. There is no doubt that for Barthes, ideology is an important component of social life and that in its formation the literary work has a significant part to play. But in Barthes’s statement, too, the word “ideology” has not occurred. Why? Perhaps Barthes is wary of diluting history in terms of happenings, ideas and interventions and seeks to illuminate the *essential* nature of a literary work as representation and resistance simultaneously. At the same time, representation is a peculiar ordering, a pattern that a writer gives to his/her work. Also see that resistance signifies the critiquing of an already existing view of the circumstance. In either case, whether as pattern giving or resistance, ideology would emerge as an inescapable category, something that enables the writer to “represent” the world.

Lennard J. Davis, an American critic who has probed the nature of fiction quite objectively, is more conscious of the role of ideology. He has argued that our view of fiction would depend a great deal upon how we visualise the working of ideology in literature. To quote: “Novels do not depict life, they depict life as it is represented by ideology. By this, I mean that life is a pretty vast and uncoordinated series of events and perceptions. But novels are pre-organised systems of experience in which characters, actions and objects have to mean something in relation to the system of each novel itself, in relation to the culture in which the novel is written, and in relation to the readers who are in that culture” (*Resisting Novels: Ideology and Fiction*, p. 24). Do you agree that novels are “pre-conceived systems of experience,” in the sense that their authors have planned to express an opinion in them about the reality of the time, or at least that individual experiences get connected in the novels to project a general view of things? Davis has also stated that each novel has an independent and distinct system of this kind with reference to which each incident or character begins to represent a meaning or a general trend. Such a “system of experience” is the ideology of the novel – it is the outcome of clash between an

author's general viewpoint and actual happenings in the arena of an existing culture. Through the use of "culture," Davis has drawn the reader into the discussion as a significant participant because like the writer, the reader, too, has a viewpoint and ideology which gets conveyed or constructed at his/her level also.

That novels have their peculiar "pre-organised systems of experience" and that each novel (also in the case of novels of the same author) has distinct systems of experience might suggest that such a system is open to change and evolution. This means that an author constantly works out his/her system in the novels. The obvious implication is that a system or an ideology can be false or true and thus project an angle not entirely acceptable to another system – in a different novel of the author or to the reader. Such a system may also have a bearing upon the culture of which the work, the author and the reader are a part. This makes Davis consider ideology in a broader framework, "as a system of beliefs of a particular group or class; as false ideas or false consciousness; and the general cultural system for the creation of signs and meanings" (p.51).

In Davis's comment, beliefs of "a group or class" fall outside the purview of the novel as such and have a connection with the work through what he calls culture. There is also the hint that a "general cultural system" might also be false. But false in what way and according to which standard or criterion? An answer to this question would inevitably lead us to the consideration of a social system under which justice vis-à-vis the distribution of surplus may be given or denied to a group of people. Davis is right in indicating that victims of injustice in a society may not be aware of this fact and may continue thinking that their world is rationally and justly governed. The idea of "general cultural system" also clearly indicates a well-regulated oppressive system that constantly provides false consciousness to the masses living under it. In quite a few cases, the literary work could reflect such a fact and give an "ideological" outline of an alternative system, amorphous but holding a clear appeal to the reader. Literature in history seems to do this all the time.

6.5 HOW ARE MOST IDEOLOGIES DEFICIENT?

Should we confine our discussion of ideology in literature to particular works or authors and say in consequence that ideology is a false or true consciousness of a social formation embodied in a literary work? The difficulty in dealing with this question is that we generally consider literature to be merely a part of the cultural phenomenon. By virtue of dealing with particular experiences, aspirations, doubts, sufferings, etc. of people, literature does capture the reality of a period on a cultural plane. In such a case, literature is seen to bring out the existing cultural trends most realistically. We have examples of literary works reflecting vast historical changes and great social antagonisms. In this context, Shakespeare immediately comes to mind. We see in his plays the process of evolution of various renaissance responses against the background of medievalism. Be it the history plays or tragedies, Shakespeare's works open up new vistas of appreciation and reveal to us the process of emergence of humanist values and rational assessment of trends. At the same time, we admire the way in which Shakespeare made use of the cultural-literary material available at the time, as well as the strong nationalistic upsurge among English masses in the sixteenth century. This constituted the general cultural system that Shakespeare drew upon to compose those works.

What should our attitude be towards the great writers of the past who are present with us as luminaries of a glorious heritage? The question would involve a reconsideration of the humanist tradition that has come down to us from the renaissance. The problem with a great and significant tradition is that it presents history only as a sequence of positive victories even as the more destructive, wasteful and cruel aspects of life are pushed to the background. Because of such a thing happening, all seems rosy in Elizabethan England, a place of great turmoils that contributed towards the English

nationalist identity, social consolidation and enlarged productivity. What do we make of this view? While attempting an answer to this, we should keep in mind that our view of the past, with its landmarks and bright symbols, is a form of ideology that constitutes a set of beliefs enabling us to forge a view of the contemporary world. Frederic Jameson poses this problem by quoting Walter Benjamin from the latter's 'Theses on the Philosophy of history': "As in all previous history, whoever emerges as victor still participates in that triumph in which today's rulers march over the prostrate bodies of their victims. As is customary, the spoils are borne aloft in that triumphal parade. These are generally called the cultural heritage. The latter finds a rather distanced observer in the historical materialist. For such cultural riches, as he surveys them, everywhere betray an origin which he cannot but contemplate with horror. They owe their existence, not merely to the toil of the great creators who have produced them, but to the anonymous forced labour of the latter's contemporaries. There has never been a document of culture which was not at one and the same time a document of barbarism." (Frederic Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (London: Methuen), p. 281).

Can we call a "document of culture," such as a Shakespeare play, also a "document of barbarism"? According to Benjamin, a historical epoch that saw the flowering of culture and imaginative literature also bore witness to the ordinary toil, misery and agony of the vast majority of people. Should we view these two aspects of life as separate from and independent of each other? This is an intensely moral question and tells us to examine the nature of ideology considered so very useful by the rulers of a particular time to interpret and appropriate in one specific way the victories and triumphs of the past. Let us see Frederic Jameson's paraphrase of Benjamin's statement:

So it is that a Marxian hermeneutic – the decipherment by historical materialism of the cultural monuments and traces of the past – must come to terms with the certainty that all the works of class history as they have survived and been transmitted to people the various museums, canons and "traditions" of our own time, are all in one way or another profoundly ideological, have all had a vested interest in and a functional relationship to social formations based on violence and exploitation; and that, finally, the restoration of the meaning of the greatest cultural monuments cannot be separated from a passionate and partisan assessment of everything that is oppressive in them and that knows complicity with privilege and class domination, stained with the guilt not merely of culture in particular but of History itself as one long nightmare (299).

Of course, Jameson's comment does not detract from Shakespeare's creative genius. What it does is to draw our attention to those ideological attempts of the later rulers who, unlike the "historical materialist," prefer to incorporate a past cultural triumph as an act of unadulterated excellence.

6.6 IDEOLOGY IN OPERATION IN A LITERARY WORK: THEORY

Lukacs' view of ideology is precise. For him, ideology consists in the determining principle of a work, the view that provides unity to the large number of scattered experiences in a work. The critical reader is supposed to locate ideology and examine its nature to ascertain the extent to which it lightens up the area of social happenings and experiences sought to be captured by the writer. For instance, Lukacs sees in the fiction of James Joyce (1882-1941) the "perpetually oscillating patterns of sense and memory data, their powerfully charged – but aimless and directionless – fields of force, (that) give rise to an epic structure which is *static*, reflecting a belief in the basically static character of events" (*The Meaning of Contemporary Realism*, p. 18). For Lukacs, the view of Joyce is static, a view that accepts things as they are and is

unable to identify the centres of society where new structures and relationships are forged. According to Lukacs, the reason for such a view may be that Joyce *intends* to represent a consciousness as something given, as a being that watches the phenomenon around it from a distance. Joyce does not seem to follow the connection between this being and the environment in which it is placed. In him, both exist simultaneously as well as independent of each other, the former living in it, watching, interpreting, even critiquing the latter but only in the manner of a deadening and restricting thing. Does this consciousness grow and change in the process of doing so? In answer, one can say that there is an obvious process of learning and realisation within the consciousness but that does not amount to a rational reconstruction of self. According to Lukacs, such a modernist ideology influences representation. Lukacs poses the question thus: "What determines the style of a given work of art? How does the intention determine the form? (We are concerned here, of course, with the intention realised in the work; it need not coincide with the writer's conscious intention). The distinctions that concern us are not those between stylistic 'techniques' in the formalistic sense. It is the view of the world, the ideology or *weltanschauung* underlying a writer's work, that counts. And it is the writer's attempt to reproduce this view of the world, which constitutes his/her 'intention', and is the formative principle underlying the style of a given piece of writing. Looked at in this way, style ceases to be a formalistic category. Rather, it is rooted in content; it is the specific form of a specific content" (p.19). In this quotation, mark "the intention realised in the work." Do we then say that the realised intention in a work is ideology? However, Lukacs is consistent with his comment on Joyce where he referred to the actual "character of events" in Joyce's work. This implies that style is not a matter of some skill that a writer possesses before the act of writing and which can be shown as separate from representation, but rather that style exists in the representation itself in the form of realised intention. In such a case, the realised intention, ideology and style enjoy a close and inseparable identity. Still, Lukacs makes a clear distinction between ideology, which is "the formative principle", and the style which is "specific form of a specific content." In the case of Joyce, "modernism" (a static world view) would be the ideology while the actual form of consciousness emerging in the work would be the style.

6.7 IDEOLOGY IN OPERATION IN A LITERARY WORK: EXAMPLE

In our context, E.M.Forster's example can be useful in grasping the working of an ideology in a literary work. Here, I do not particularly adhere to Lukacs's notion of the authorial intention. Instead, I say that liberal-humanism as a world view has its own way of determining and shaping an experience irrespective of the author guided by it. Humanism is broadly understood as the doctrine that not only recognises and supports humanist causes in the modern world – equality between man and man, justice, peaceful coexistence, unprejudiced treatment of communities, nationalities and races other than one's own, etc. – but also stands in clear opposition to those tendencies that work against these causes. A humanist, therefore, would fearlessly critique the forces of inequality and prejudice in our world. If one were a humanist, for instance, there should not be for him any scope for compromise on this. What then is liberal humanism? Is it a part of humanism or a decisive and radical modification of the original idea? The word 'liberal' in modern discourse stands for courtesy, integrity, deep and sensitive understanding of issues, dignity and a respect for the person who may disagree with us. For us, Fielding in *A Passage to India* is such a person. A liberal humanist to the core, Fielding makes no distinction between an Indian and a European and relates to people on the strength of personal appeal:

By now, he was a hard-bitten, good-tempered, intelligent fellow on the verge of middle age, with a belief in education ... He was not unpatriotic ... He had no racial feeling – not because he was superior to his brother civilians, but

because he had matured in a different atmosphere, where the herd-instinct does not flourish (Penguin, p.61-62).

The large number of negatives ("not unpatriotic," "no racial feeling," "not because," "does not flourish") in this description indicate the individualistic nature of liberal humanism which stands apart from the "herd-instinct" of collectivity. Mature, "hard-bitten" and "intelligent," Fielding has come to acquire balance and equanimity in the process of living through turmoil: "He had been in love, engaged to be married, lady broke it off, memories of her and thoughts about her had kept him from other women for a time; then indulgence, followed by repentance and equilibrium" (115). Fielding's growing friendship with Dr. Aziz in the novel has this firm basis of personal relationships. In this metaphor of friendship, we see a possible closeness between the two worlds – the eastern and western. This is the extent to which liberal humanism can go, it can grasp the question only at the abstract metaphorical level. However, we should have no quarrel with the metaphor if it were to place the problematic nature of a modern political phenomenon in relief and assist us to focus upon not just the intolerant and greatly cynical nature of imperialism but also the constructive and dynamic protest of the community in a colonised society. See if this happens in *A Passage to India*. The fact is that for Forster, the protest of the colonised people is looked at with disgust. As the author turns to portray social unrest in the novel, he is unable to show any sensitivity in the angry Indians. The irritating and rather mischievous solidarity, as the author sees it, of the Indian masses against the British bureaucracy does not meet with Fielding's approval. Instead of recognising the deep potentiality of colonised people's assertion, Forster looks towards Aziz for a positive bonding at the individual level. Thus the idea of personal relationship replaces that of a consolidated mass protest against a colonising power. Of course, the irony is that the author-narrator offers a largely acceptable insight at the end of the novel where it is suggested that Fielding (west) can have a meaningful association with Aziz (east) only when the two countries have moved out of the present imperialist nation-colony relationship. But the metaphor has further shifted – from human individuals to animal kingdom and nature, with the author thoughtfully presenting the sensitivity of all but the humans: "But the horses didn't want it – they swerved apart; the earth didn't want it ... the temples, the tank, the jail, the palace, the birds ... they didn't want it." In this way, liberal humanism has widened the scope to include all forms of the animate and inanimate world and offered a hugely universalistic alternative. It is another matter though that the doctrine clearly overlooks the dimension of political bonding of the Indian middle class and working people for the purpose of fighting imperialism – something that had emerged so very threateningly for British imperialism also in the post-First World War years. It is our job as Indian readers to critically note in the novel the absence of (ideology has a whole range of absences in its working) any tangible reference to or even awareness of the political movement in India led by Gandhi around the years sought to be captured by Forster in the novel.

Coming back to the portrayal of mass protest by Indians in *A Passage to India*, one cannot fail to notice the rather curious equating of the British masters with the Indian educated and lower classes (barring the punkahwallah) in the post-molestation scenario. With profound anguish and helplessness, Fielding disapprovingly observes the overactive Indian lawyers and others falsely and vulgarly twisting the whole thing to the disadvantage of the British. But this is not Fielding's view alone, but also of the colonising power which has thrived all along on the notion of meanness, stupidity and cunning of the native. Is this not a curious blending of liberalism and imperialism? It seems that another twain has met. Or was it actually a twain in the first place?

6.8 LET US SUM UP

Ideology is a more or less coherent set of beliefs and has roots in a class or group of people at a particular time. A socio-economic system with its neutral-looking structures (parts and segments of the state) appropriates old beliefs and views and also generates new ones to perpetuate its stranglehold on people's minds. Religion, morality and ethical principles form the core of many a ruling class ideology. It is important for the owners of the means of production to mould as well as forge people's consciousness with a view to getting their uncritical approbation of the existing social relationships. A discussion of ideology is greatly helpful in understanding the meaning and message of a literary work as well as its aesthetic appeal. One can see a particular ideology influencing and determining a writer's consciousness as also the way in which that consciousness shapes characters, voices, responses and situations in a literary work. An alert reading of literature is sure to grasp the broadly political function of an ideology.

6.9 QUESTIONS

1. Explain with reference to a book in your course how ideology may influence and determine a literary work.
2. Would it be correct to say those social structures such as family, community and caste hide beneath themselves the oppressive face of ideology? Discuss.

6.10 GLOSSARY

- Essence:** An important Marxist concept. Wrongly interpreted as abstracted truth. Essence should be seen as the significant idea or aspect that evolves centrally through the interplay of happenings in life, as for instance 'class essence' of a social event.
- Liberal humanism:** A new individual-centred doctrine that became widely accepted in capitalist Europe in the early twentieth century. Liberal humanism swears by individual freedom, sensitivity and distance from life of the ordinary masses.
- Political unconscious:** In Fredric Jameson's words, "that more tangible historicity of the concepts and categories by which we attempt to understand ... things" (in history). This implies that concepts take shape in specific surroundings and the process involved occurs in the arena of indeterminate biases. These more or less active biases constitute the political unconscious. Such a "political unconscious" helps the reader interpret a text in a unique way.
- Totality:** Lukacs has often used this work. 'Totality' does not negate multiplicity or variety. It basically emphasises inter-connectedness of different parts of a phenomenon.
- Weltanschauung:** The connecting thought, the formative principle that also has a character of its own.

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