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## Marxism and Literary Planning\*

MARXISM'S STATUS AND IMPORTANCE is so evident in human history and the history of human thought that further acknowledgements would be a waste of time. If biases did not get in the way, perhaps everyone would readily admit that Marxism has indeed tried to understand human existence in a largely plausible and cohesive manner and has helped certain worthwhile tendencies to move forward. But it is also a fact that because of the need to safeguard its ideological integrity, Marxism has sacrificed a lot for the sake of cohesiveness. Even as it has helped new tendencies along, it has thrown overboard some factors and facts that are not just sociological in nature but also biological and as such cannot be changed in parallel with ideological shifts and political upheavals. On the one hand, Marxism ridicules enduring values and attempts to impose total relativity in every matter, and on the other, compelled by the irrational demands of human nature and also to escape becoming a man-made ideological product itself, it has established some enduring values of its own, whose sole distinction is their relative tangibility. Since it was imperative for Marxism to thwart other interpretations of life, it attempted to declare them irrational and unscientific, and give its own doctrines the permanence of exact sciences. However, no theory can stand on absolute and abstract relativity insofar as human sciences are concerned; in other words, it cannot make it in the empirical world. Even from a theoretical perspective if 2+2 do not make 4 in mathematics, one is obliged to suppose that they do in the quotidian affairs of life, deception though this may be. But thousands of such deceptions or compromises are necessary in life. Hence every theory about life of necessity presupposes the primacy of a certain number of permanent and fixed values. Marxism too could not escape it. However, because of its concentration only on the economic aspect and subordination of all other aspects under it, Marxism also ended up borrowing its enduring values

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\*"Mārksiyat aur Adabī Maṣūba-bandī," from Muḥammad Ḥasan 'Askarī, *Insān aur Ādmī* (Aligarh: Educational Book House, 1976), 95–110.

from economic factors. Marxism was not alone in committing this error as it was and continues to be the norm for all other scientific, philosophical, and religious doctrines, whereby the values particular to one branch of life are foisted upon all the rest. If there was a difference, it lay in that the traditional values had to do with the inner life of man and could help devise a system not just for his external but also his emotional and spiritual life. By contrast, Marxist values relate wholly to the external world. By excluding major emotional questions these values cannot help construct any satisfactory blueprint for the emotional and spiritual life of man. Marxism firmly believes that by changing economic conditions it can also change man. Old ethical and religious systems, on the other hand, thought that to change man it was imperative to change his views and beliefs first. It is possible that the latter view may not suffice totally, but at least it is a notch above the Marxist view because it assumes man has a mind and not just a belly, and takes into account the reality of psychological urges. The latter may appear vague and inconsequential; in fact, they constitute the crux of the entire economic problem. Marxism can relate the history of the development of capitalism, but is unable to explain the urge that drives a capitalist to accumulate so much wealth. Only psychology can provide the answer. From this vantage, what is basically an economic problem ends up being an ethical and psychological problem. The entire communist struggle itself is based on ethical principles, though Marxism hesitates to evaluate itself from this perspective. When it claims for the worker the right to enjoy the fruits of his labor, the claim is based on a set of altogether absolute and abstract ethical principles. It cannot be substantiated by logical and scientific proofs at all. Without some enduring principles of equity and justice, communism could never have come into being; hence Marxism is an ethical and emotional concept. Yet it rejects having anything to do with emotions and claims to be a purely logical and scientific concept. Nothing wrong there if it had only concerned itself with planning for the economic and political aspects of external life and turned over the construction of a system for man's inner life to some other doctrine. However, Marxism insists on being the sole arbiter for the gamut of human affairs, loath to accept the intrusion of any other concept, but at the same time lacking the ability to provide a system for the emotional needs of man.

No wonder if a Marxist feels somewhat lost outside the limited spheres of economics and politics, unable to hold his own on the complex and most important emotional problems of life, looking downright ridiculous in his attempt to hurriedly pull out some answer from his economic baggage. The smallest, most insignificant matters throw him into a panic, as if

he has walked straight into a hornets' nest; ordinary cultural issues annoy him and he flies off the handle the minute anyone so much as opens their mouth.

However, in an ordinary man's life economic beliefs are less important than an established emotional order because he must deal with one emotional situation or another at every turn. If emotional structures did not exist already to seamlessly channel his skittish nervous urges, he would go berserk. Even with the finest communist system, he wouldn't be able to live a peaceful life. Emotional dissatisfaction, then, is the price Marxists pay for their ideological steadfastness. An ordinary man is compelled to accept whatever emotional structures are within easy reach to calm his nervous tension. Usually such structures tend to be old, well worn, and certainly non-Marxist, which makes Marxists frown on them: how did this regression set in? Until such time as Marxism is established in the external world, a person could perhaps delude himself thinking that when it has firmly taken root, it will develop its own emotional traditions and structures. But right from its inception the communist system had to face the practical problem of what people should feel about the insignificant as well as the serious matters of their life. The pity is that not only is Marxism unable to deal with this human problem in a befitting manner, it also doesn't allow people to step out of its straight-jacketed beliefs. While it does not directly determine emotional channels, some such channels could be extracted from its assumptions. However, no great literature or art can be produced on the basis of the principles so far derived from those assumptions. This because Marxists cringe at looking in the face of life's major realities and feed merely on cheerfully artless good faith. It was well within the realm of possibility that Marxism could have developed, in the course of time, at least practical, if not theoretical concepts that could have made communist culture a peer of the major cultures of the world in substance. But philosophically, Marxism itself and more particularly its theorists have lacked intellectual humility all along. Their erstwhile success in the practical sphere has turned their heads with arrogance even more. The net result being that, despite its material success, a strange pall of despondency has swept over its spiritual life, however hard they might try to plate it with gold. The Russian government claims that no country reads more books than Russia, both classical and modern. Yet with all this reading and its citizens interest in cultural matters, Russia hasn't produced anything in the arts that might rank alongside the product of "bourgeois" culture. This is not an accusation. Even [Maksim] Gorky has variously admitted as much. But the admission didn't help Gorky diagnose the malady correctly, and neither could he come up with a proper prescription to

remedy it. On the contrary, he fell a victim to his own "piety."

I have before me one of Gorky's articles in which he has presented a complete blueprint for the changes that are needed in the literary traditions of Russian revolutionary poets and the path along which they should be guided. The forms that ideology and indifference to everyday life assume in this piece are not just tragic, they are laughable. One wonders how a writer of his stature could so phlegmatically ignore ordinary matters that are visible to everyone. An analysis of this article would be useful insofar as it embodies the essence of Marxist perspective on literature and culture.

Before offering his putative blueprint of the new Russian literature, Gorky first praises the writers who will be its producers. Gorky feels that the young Russian generation is a developing and self-reliant force. (All right, we accept that—unconditionally!) The logic of history expects this generation to create new forms and possibilities of life. Marxists always insist on their culture being totally "new" in everything, even though when practical difficulties get in the way, they are forced to admit the need for a knowledge of tradition; however their definition of "knowledge" plays havoc with the "tradition." It is perhaps somewhat easy to create "new forms" in external matters, but "newness" does not come easy in spiritual life. Here, "newness," if it can be created at all, is possible only through principles relating directly to man's intellectual and psychological life, not through those that seek to manage the external manifestations of nature. Such principles absolutely cannot bring about a comprehensive and satisfactory change in the spiritual life. It is self-deception to think that men can be changed like machines.

Further on Gorky says that Russian youth must also create new forms in literature. This presupposes a prior knowledge of the old literature, to learn from it, firstly, the use of technique and, secondly, the process of the rise and decline of the middle class and to look into the causes of its decline. Literature is an indispensable source for this investigation because the bourgeois poets have tellingly portrayed the entire process of decline and presented the whole drama of the "useless men" in an outstanding manner.

Some Marxist writers betray a common tendency in their reluctance to consider the pre-communist man as man at all. For them, he is merely a "feudal" or a "bourgeois." The same mentality is apparent in Gorky's account. Surely the bourgeois class is on the decline; it is also true that bourgeois poets have in fact described this decline, and in a way have also participated in it, but the bourgeois class, notwithstanding its particular characteristics, is human too, not some other species. As such it is like any other

class in many respects. As long as these classes are human, some common value will always be shared among them. Economic prosperity or hardship cannot change their basic humanness, though Gorky and the like, driven as they are by ideological or emotional bias, may choose to overlook this common denominator. In his zeal to whip up an ideology, Gorky has quite ignored the basic humanness of the middle class and when he chose *Creatures That Once Were Men* as the title for one of his fictional works he even attempted to ignore the basic humanity of the working class. If Marxism, Gorky, or whoever, desires to truly transform human life (in psychological terms, that is), their primary duty is to keep in view the essential humanity of man, which enjoys a permanent status of its own regardless of the garb it may choose to appear in. If they had cared to, Marxists could have acquired an awareness of man's essential humanity from religion or art, but both are suspect in their eyes. For Gorky, a nineteenth-century poet is not a man, he is only a bourgeois poet. This is such gross blindness that I begin to have doubts even about Gorky's short stories and wonder whether, in spite of elements of kindness, compassion and emotion, any true human meaning could ever be found in a man with such a mindset. What other outrage could be greater than to deny man his human status? Granted, poets like Baudelaire portray the collapse of the middle class, but they portray the soul of man even more. Baudelaire does in fact announce the demise of the middle class, but he also warns Marxist culture that if it fails to create a human standard of good and evil, it will flounder in spite of its external "new forms." A poet who could say "You—hypocrite reader—my double—my brother!" is not just a poet of the middle class, but also a poet who represents humanity across time. Nouveau riche like Gorky cannot easily understand that mentally a poet can rise above his culture to reflect on life. Middle-class culture may contain the combined vices of the world, but it also produced those who had nothing to do with any class, who were just human beings and who just wrote about the timeless facts of human existence. For Gorky though, nineteenth-century poetry had no aesthetic merit or any human meaning, and all because it was born at a particular time within a particular group, so it must be written off.

What might be the "new forms" in poetry that Russian youth would create? Gorky answers, "brave poetry," because this is what new life demands. To a degree one can accept this for it is true that nineteenth-century poetry had reached the extreme of pessimism and defeatism; poetry constituted the expression of gloomy feelings. Surely "new poetry" must rid itself of this feebleness; it should be filled with a new resolve, a new hope. However, it is dangerous to accept the phrase "brave poetry" with-

out fully understanding its implications. It can also mean that poetry should celebrate only man's conquests and achievements, and deliberately shut its eyes to the weaker aspects of human existence, so that it is reduced to boasting and bragging—as if its incumbent duty was to become a panegyric. More strictly speaking, to sing the praises of man's abilities and powers to the fullest, and then some. But in the absence of a counterbalancing principle, this singing of praise is tantamount to tawdriness and vainglory. Homer's too is "brave poetry," but he does not lose sight of other forces besides man operating in the universe. Without realistically assigning man his true place in the universe, Homer's poetry could not be as great as it is. If the tragic aspects of life were ignored, civilization itself would be an empty shell, never mind poetry.

A second related question might be asked: does brave poetry only celebrate conquests and triumphs? Is poetry about spiritual struggle not brave, or Baudelaire's poetry? Does bravery lie only in overcoming external events, and is moral struggle, the effects of which are not immediately apparent, outside the sphere of brave poetry?

Gorky further elucidates the "new forms" of poetry. He identifies "nature," "love" and "death" as the three principle subjects of old poetry, he explains the old attitude about them and suggests what the new attitude should be. He praises the perspective of old poets with regard to nature in these words:

Old poets praised nature. Sometimes they presented themselves as its masters, other times as "nature's children," but they praised it as its slaves. Their attitude betrayed servility and obedience to nature. Their poems resembled eulogies to the glories of a tyrant king and sounded like prayers. They overlooked storms, floods, famine and other brutal acts of nature. They never incited man to fight and subdue nature, nor did they themselves protest against this blind, tyrannical force. However, now times have changed. Now even natural scenes can be transformed in Russia, swamps can be remade into lush gardens. But poets don't even cast so much as a sidelong glance at the swamps and deserts. Russian poets should write about this new enterprise. They have now found a new subject, viz., the collective struggle of a well-formed intellect against nature's primitive forces and all "primeval" things, and the nurturing and education of a classless man who is the creator of a "different nature," and destined to perform momentous feats through his willpower, intellect, imagination, and physical prowess.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Nowhere does Askari mention the title of Gorky's essay which is the subject of his critique so the translation of this passage should be considered twice removed from the original Russian.—*Translator*

Now, if you analyzed this account not only would you find it replete with all manner of misconceptions and wrong-headedness, but also outright misstatements—perhaps not willful but merely a product of naïve good faith. Anyone who is even slightly knowledgeable about European poetry will laugh at the claim that bourgeois poetry neglects the darker aspects of nature. It is possible that bourgeois poets were overwhelmed by hopelessness in their protest against nature, but bourgeois poetry is not devoid of protest against its blind forces. Tennyson's poetry is full of examples of such protest, while French poetry of the nineteenth century contains a superabundance of it. And it is also incorrect that bourgeois poets never incited man to fight with nature. Although Gorky has condemned all old poetry in this regard I shall deliberately omit Shakespeare and confine myself only to the nineteenth century. Is the belief that man can conquer nature and must vanquish it not found in Browning? Is Shelley's attitude toward nature merely that of a slave? The will to lock horns with nature is plentiful in Romantic literature, even if it is tinged with a feeling of man's inevitable failure. Bourgeois poets have not curried favor with nature everywhere and every time; rather their attitude, even within a single poet, has been different and variegated, like the attitude of all human beings. If deserts can be transformed into flourishing gardens, well, congratulations. That's very nice. Surely it is a testament to man's greatness. But when we discuss poetry, what needs to be considered is the attitude of the poet who is writing about such an achievement. One might write a chronogram about such marvelous feats, or just hortatory lines such as the following:

*nehr par čal rahī hai pañčakkī  
d̥hun kī pūri hai kām kī pakkī*

Watermill churning away at the riverbank  
Steadfast in resolve, unflinching in work

Such stupendous feats may well fill one with unnecessary and exaggerated exuberance or turn one's head with inflated pride; however, what matters is not the composition of poems celebrating them but the spiritual culture that informs them. After turning desert into meadow, if man thinks that he has now become the Lord God, has overcome nature, then his fate will not be any different than Shaddād's and Nimrod's. Man's social consciousness perceived this frailty of human nature long ago and presented it in the form of these old narratives. If Gorky's new poetry remained drunk with only man's achievements and pride and was allowed to forget the tragic aspects of human existence, it would become little else than swagger. However far he might progress, in the end man is left to face his

inherent incapacity and powerlessness. Never mind external forces, man's own psyche is beset with such wild demons that even the power of a socially organized mind cannot tame them. Even if a "new nature" were created, how would it affect the spiritual life of man so that the resulting changes would bring about the birth of a wholly new man? Already "new man" is an arguable concept open for discussion; but external action absolutely cannot produce a man with a lofty moral substance. If being overwhelmed by nature amounts to imbecility and cowardice, the belief that one can overwhelm nature unconditionally is courting disaster. In fact, nature itself desires to be subdued by man, like a healthy and vigorous woman by man. Nature does submit, but only with willing cooperation, and the struggle between the two does not result in slavery for either, only in power and beauty. Gorky is wrong in assuming that the thought of subjugating nature did not cross anyone's mind before communism came along. The nouveau riche always want to be the only power in nature and none be equal to them. Well, their spiritual downfall is before us—Shaddād, the Pharaoh, Faust—all of them. It must be admitted, though, that no other culture has come anywhere close to the communist culture in its ability to subjugate nature. However, to turn such subjugation into a fundamental doctrine with the concomitant denial of any force above man is to gather ammunition for ultimate disappointment and despair.

Gorky's statements about "love" are something else again. One wins heads and tails, both ways. On one hand, bourgeois poetry is blasted for its pessimism and penchant for doom and gloom, on the other, a demand is made to say things that would diminish certitude and generate despair. And all this in an effort to denigrate bourgeois poetry at all costs. Thus Gorky opines that old poetry glorified "love" as the single most formidable creative force, but failed to comprehend that this force too was a blind, primitive instinct, the instinct to procreate. It produces animals that are detrimental to the health and economic life of man, for instance, mice, flies, mosquitoes. In other words, nature is indicted for not creating everything just for our convenience. (This is the same egocentric view that regards man as the center of the universe.) The capitalist state looks with indifference at the insects that spread disease, for why should it give a damn about public health. But a preliterate state cannot be so indifferent. It fights against the creative process of nature. Embarrassed by the inadequacy of his arguments Gorky counsels that he is not asking poets to kill the mice, but that they should try to change poetry's attitude toward nature.

I'm dazed—the statement is entirely incomprehensible, to me at least. The only conclusion one could draw from Gorky is that poets should write poems for the Department of Public Health. As for bourgeois poetry, no-



where does it deny that love is an instinct. The balance of love's harmful and unsettling aspects—whether mental or physical—are found in bourgeois literature. That this instinct has managed to develop sundry mental associations quite escapes Gorky. Sex is as much carnal desire as psychological drive. Man's greatest distinction lies in having tamed and refined his sexual instinct so that apart from procreation he also employs it for his spiritual training. If one wanted to focus only on the darker side of things, well, the communist movement has its share of opportunists who are very dangerous to society. Might we call this movement evil then? The sexual instinct does produce mice, but it also affects man's mental and spiritual life. And poetry ultimately has to do with the life of the spirit. After the communist state had slaughtered all the mice, would this infuse some new purity into man's "love"?

Actually Gorky holds the view that in the communist state sexual relations will basically be something entirely new. He unequivocally states that primitive forms of procreation will disappear in communist society, and so will those other forms that benefit the parasitic creatures beholden to the strength of others for existence. I for one cannot find any meaning or substance in this statement, which exceeds all limits of absurdity. How, precisely, changes in social customs and practices are expected to affect basic, primeval sexual relations is hard to understand. While a qualitative change in the expression of a basic instinct is conceivable, whereby it may become better or worse, how can basic sexual relations become wholly new, unless the whole physical and nervous structure of man is remade.

Be that as it may, Gorky springs another charge: the trilling of birds informs us that love produces song. Surely love has greatly helped art, but it has helped industries that produce perfumes and cosmetics for women no less. In other words, Gorky's gripe is that the emotion of love has assisted the capitalist to make money. I suggest we also lodge a complaint against the sun: why does it provide light for the capitalists' factories? Should we stop appreciating everything just because it might be helping the capitalist in some way? Does this mean that emotion would become lofty and sublime only after the unconscionable exploitation and plunder of the worker has ended and not before?

In everything Gorky has to say about "love" only one observation is meaningful: Although poets have raised woman to the status of goddess in bourgeois society, she continues to be treated like an animal. In Russia, on the other hand, she is equal to man. She is mentally free and she can do everything. It is not that one cannot disagree with his statement, but let's accept that she enjoys a respectable position in Russian society. This should mean that she is treated neither as a goddess nor an animal, but as one's

equal. Fine. How will this impact basic sexual relations? Esoteric mysticism alone might know. Communists relentlessly insist that everything is new in their system, which leads them to hold that they can change man's nature without the foggiest idea whether this is even possible. In their scramble for a way out, they espouse gobbledygook one can only laugh at.

The third major subject of bourgeois poetry is "death" according to Gorky. A belief in the inescapability of death, he maintains, has proved to be a boon for bourgeois society because in that society people do not love one another, and some people are even redundant, altogether useless. Such a society does not care about workers' health and longevity, but the communist state *will*. I accept all this. But will death's inevitability disappear in the communist state? In our culture, when the elders saw someone full of himself, they would be prompted to say with both fear and regret that "he has forgotten he will die one day." This is exactly what is happening with communist culture too! A universe with no other creature except humans would not just be infinitely drab and colorless, it would also be decaying. In poetry the thought that someday man will overcome death does sound lyrically pleasing, but to say this in a serious essay, and to make it the cornerstone of new poetry is pretty hazardous. There must be a limit to egomania, otherwise it will result in a stark disbelief and hopelessness that is sterile and fruitless. If it is at all possible to overcome death, it will have to be through the spirit, not through the body. So what if you prolong the life of a worker to fifty thousand years—eventually he still must face death. To remain safe from tragedy, to such an extent that it is banished even from one's own thoughts, suggests the absence of pluck and a doddering will. That a philosophy poised for collective welfare should end in the worst kind of selfishness is an ironic comment on communism. To consider individual life worthwhile is of course laudable, indeed essential, but to turn individual life into the very foundation of a philosophy of life is to gather the means for the destruction of one's own civilization.

The crux of the matter is that although communism has studied the needs of the body and considered their fulfillment, it initially turned its back on spiritual culture and, when that was no longer possible, crammed its reasoning with clutter. Breaking away from religious and cultural traditions did not turn out to be quite as harmless as communism had imagined, exactly the same as the error scientists committed earlier with their indifference to philosophy and religion. Since by themselves scientific discoveries and natural phenomena cannot have human value and meaning, they were forced to admit the need for some philosophy to determine their attitude toward these things. Lacking facility in philosophical issues, they picked from among the popular philosophers of the day

without proper critical scrutiny. One often sees that fairly competent scientists turn out to be quite superstitious in non-scientific matters. Marxists fared no better. Compelled by their immediate needs they accepted perspectives that did not mesh.

Gorky's final counsel to poets is to write about scientific achievements and eminent scientists because scientific pursuit is far more deserving of attention, wonder, and compassion than man's quest in any other field. Surely scientific pursuits are commendable and poems should celebrate man's scientific achievements. However, to regard them as the most important subject of the new "brave" poetry would ultimately mean that what is considered important has relevance only for external life. Anything can be the subject of poetry, but not of great poetry until it incorporates elements that have a profound and meaningful bearing on man's mental, emotional, and spiritual life. It is the human significance of an external event and not the event itself that constitutes the subject of great poetry. But Marxism persists in its wayward thinking that external actions and manifestations are important in and of themselves. The result of this uncritical method has led Marxist culture to manifest elements with characteristics of tribal culture. Compared to its magnificent material achievements, the spiritual accomplishments of the new Russian culture are quite insubstantial. And understandably! External conquests do not lead to stupendous cultural achievements; rather what makes them possible is a meaningful, realistic, and balanced human attitude. If Gorky was trying to delineate a path for his new poetry, he should have thought about poets as human beings, not just as poets of the proletariat period. Likewise, he should not have been so overly biased against the bourgeois poets. He should have at least supposed that if he looked hard enough, he might have found some enduring values in these members of the leisured classes. Both the proletariat and the bourgeois poets share at least one thing in common: they are born the same way and die the same way. Just this fact alone creates many common bonds in their existential values. Those who are striving to create a classless society should at least have the ability to reflect from certain perspectives upon the entire history of literature as a human and classless achievement. Should this new poetry ever come about, we shall eagerly welcome it, but this poetry should definitely say something worthwhile about the "old man," and say it with sincerity, otherwise there is absolutely no need for a new poetry. The theaters set up by the departments of agriculture and health for the cultural education of the masses in communist society would suffice. □

—*Translated by Muhammad Umar Memon*