

Literature, Capitalism and Resistance: Rethinking the Politics of Literature

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Abstract

How to define the nature and function of art/literature in a context of dominant globalized neo-liberal worldview is the pressing concerns many literary and cultural theorists. In Jean Francois Lyotard's view, the emerging postmodern condition tends to commoditize everything from human relationship to potential of literature as transformative tool. From the very beginning of human civilization literature has played an influential role of social transformation and emancipation; but in contemporary late-capitalist-technological society, this function of literature has diminished to a large extent. This paper aims at exploring this problematic question of the nature of literature in contemporaneity; is literature dead like the 'death of god'? Is literature capable of performing any resistance to the assimilatory nature of 'ambient' society? Is there any need to change our perspective towards the definitionality of literature? This paper is an attempt to explore these questions.

Key Words: resistance, neoliberalism, anti-literature, nomadic thinking

“Art, it is said, is not a mirror, but a hammer: It does not reflect, it shapes.”
(Trotsky, 2005)

The last decade of Twentieth Century witnessed an unprecedented and drastic shift towards a new economic configuration what is term “neoliberalism” (Steger & Roy). This emerging mode of economic production, originally based upon ‘laissez faire’ and ‘free market’, in contemporary late capitalist period, a nomenclature popularized by Ernest Mendel in his book The Late Capitalism, has brought about tremendous transformation in socio-economic transactions and cultural life. Growing McDonaldization, as George Ritzer characterizes the contemporaneity in The McDonaldization of Society, as the social reality in global capitalism has given rise

to few multivariate and multinational organizations and the status of knowledge has also changed as the next marketable commodity after natural resources; a relentless reification of everything from human relationships to art, culture and literature has been launched in full measure. While reporting on the status of knowledge in “postmodern condition” Jean Francois Lyotard enunciates the nefarious bonhomie between knowledge and power; how accumulation of more knowledge yields someone more power, how discourses are manipulated to legitimize certain beliefs and institutions through what he calls “language game”. His succinct commentary on the political nature of knowledge is worth mentioning and he says-

But this aspect of the problem should not be allowed to overshadow the other, which is complementary to

it. Knowledge in the form of an informational commodity indispensable to productive power is already, and will continue to be, a major—perhaps *the* major—stake in the worldwide competition for power. It is conceivable that the nation-states will one day fight for control of information, just as they battled in the past for control over territory, and afterwards for control of access to and exploitation of raw materials and cheap labor. A new field is opened for industrial and commercial strategies on the one hand, and political and military strategies on the other. (Lyotard, p. 5)

In such a historical situation where capitalism thrives upon its necessity (and capacity) to commoditize everything to sustain its internal mechanism, the question arises as to the status of literature as mode of human communication and sensitization. If literature has been often manipulated (e.g. Stalinist Russia) as a propagandist project, either through suppressing or assimilating its revolutionary potential, the issue which perturbs me often –is how to resist the assimilatory and suppressive mechanism of the establishment, how not to be just a passive information or entertainment in the market. Nonetheless, some inevitable question springs up while we venture into this problematic issue of resistance-its definitionality, its scope and perspectives. Is resistance possible? Isn't entire history of literature, in general, is somehow a resistance to the dominant predecessors, an inherent instinct of the latter writers to "kill" Oedipal literary fathers as has been conscientiously pointed out by Harold

Bloom in his book *The Anxiety of Influence*.

Before we make any endeavour to investigate these questions, a rudimentary discussion on the idea of literature as an art form and its function in the society is very important. However, any foray into defining literature or fixing its boundaries will ultimately end up being gargantuan and picaresque because of its sheer vastness and multiplicities. Therefore, instead of embarking on an arduous task of formulating new definition, we may present a critique of existing corpus of definitions of literature and expose the problematic nature of their attempt and its political nature; for example, Arnoldian conception of literature "the best that has been thought and known in the world" (Arnold, p. xxii) suffer from patricianism and patriarchal myopia by setting up "touchstone" (Arnold, p. 111) method which excludes literature produced by minority groups. Another writer's postulation on the demarcation between literary and non-literary texts where the literary texts enjoy the privilege of "literariness" or 'verfrumsdungeffekt', accept a priori notion about literariness. F. R. Leavis's establishment of canon of 'great tradition' and their 'universality' and 'timelessness' grossly neglect questions of perspectives and ideological allegiance of the canonical texts. These humanist or formalist ways of defining literature have been criticized by many poststructural or postmodernist thinkers because of their political affirmation of transcendentalism and timelessness.

Their attempt to formulate a more materialist and contingent nature of literary discourse have shown how not to do literature as a transcendental art.

Derrida's formulation of deferral to arrive at any conclusive statement and 'sous eraser' or 'under eraser' discloses epistemological violence in giving a closer to literature. In this regard, the concept 'anti-literature' of Shellhorse and Adam Joseph or "against literature" of John Beverley is very important and they define it to be feminine, multimedial and subaltern". Shellhorse posits it as "the idea of anti-literature as a multidisciplinary, minoritarian, and multimedial "body" of writing that produces affects and new modes of perception. This idea will, in effect, challenge current, fixed conceptions of literature in the field, and will contribute to the larger discussion/impasse about literary politics" (Shellhorse, 2017, p. 15) This new form of literature is like a biological or computer virus which inaugurates a malaise to disrupt the smooth functioning, introduces an anomaly and asymmetry and uproots the hierarchical design of the established "belles letter" by which I mean literature produced in the nineteenth and first half of twentieth century's. However in such an atmosphere where impasse exists as the ultimate reality of literature, Deleuze notion of "minor literature" encapsulates the tendency prevailing in "off-centre" literature.

In order an example of a historical situation of the 5th Century BC Athenian society will suffice to understand the complex relation between literature and existing economic structure. Though often eulogized as an epitome of democratic values and egalitarian ethos, a materialist study reveals a hidden and unwanted picture- while elite poets and philosophers were wallowing in philosophical elenchus to find out eternal philosophical

or poetic truth, the plebeians and slaves shouldered the wheel of economic base. Plato's desire for an ideal state "eutopia" or "utopia" reveals a darker shadow- a shadow which thrives upon exclusionism, is such a classic example where the slaves and women are excluded from its ideal community. This historical anecdote exposes a bitter truth about the complex relationship between economic base and cultural superstructure. This paper is such an attempt to investigate fundamental questions of literature and capitalism, how capitalism commodifies literature as its tool, an ideological state apparatus and also literature poses a challenge to the established views, disrupts the smooth functioning of dominant centre.

Marx's thoughtful insight in exploring the inextricable nexus between literature as cultural superstructure and capitalism as a particular mode of production and reproduction reinstate my proposed argument. He said in Preface to A Contribution to the Critique of the Political Economy

In the social production of their existence, men inevitably enter into definite relations, which are independent of their will, namely relations of production appropriate to a given stage in the development of their material forces of production. The totality of these relations of production constitutes the economic structure of society, the real foundation, on which arises a legal and political superstructure and to which correspond definite forms of social consciousness. The mode of production of material life conditions the general process of

social, political and intellectual life.
(Marx, 1993)

Though this essentializing way of describing the complex ambience surrounding art and economy has been lambasted and convincingly repudiated, it has conveyed a significant truth of art and mode of production.

Luis Althusser's understanding of literature as an "ideological state apparatus" (Althusser, 1971) compensates prevailing inconsistency and lacuna in classical Marxism through his formulation of overdeterminism and the essay *Ideology and Ideological State Apparatus* exposes the subtlety of literature as hegemonic tool used the dominant ideology. However Slavoz Zizek's conception of art and literature is more radical and revolutionary. His philosophical investigation on art, literature and culture which are largely influenced by Lacanian Psychoanalysis and German idealism, poses a challenge as to the traditional way of thinking of ideology and refuses the possibility of escaping what he call Symbolic order. According to him, reality is already build upon impossible void and to understand ideology involves a system of signification i.e language which itself is regulated by certain codes and rules and what lies behind the curtain is not truth or "true consciousness" but an impossible madness.

Now the issue which invites our attention after short deliberation on the nature of the nexus between literature and capitalism is how to resist this easy assimilation and integration of literature as a hegemonic instrument. An important anecdote will illustrate this point- in his Jerusalem award winning speech Haruki Murakami, an

important Japanese writer says, about the role a writer must play in dismantling the illusion "Between a high, solid wall and an egg that breaks against it, I will always stand on the side of the egg" (Strecher, p. 114). I'm quite sure what message this beautiful metaphor means to convey here. From Gramsci to Said everyone has emphasized the importance the intellectuals play in reformulating and regenerating society. In *Introduction* of his book *Representation of Intellectuals*, Said says-"intellectuals should be the ones to question patriotic nationalism, corporate thinking and sense of class, racial or gender privilege" In present contemporaneity when we witness the rise of fanatical nationalism and jingoism, building a myopic wall separating self and other and resurgence of fundamentalism, this saying of Said seems more relevant.

Literature as 'communicative event', as Roman Jakobson has put it in his essay *Literature and Poetics*, involving the addresser, address and addressee i.e. writer, text and reader and a resistance can take place in anywhere separately or simultaneously. Various writers have come up with innovative way of doing way with dominant repressive structures in the text and their attention has veered into unravelling the function of language or meaning making in a text. In 1970s there were proliferation of certain disciplines like post colonialism, gender studies, race studies which questioned traditional notion about race, gender, sexuality and ethnicity; Julia Kristeva, for example, theorizes "semiotic" as a form of communication as an antithesis and resistance to dominant patriarchal literature situated within what she says "symbolic order". She defines it as "related

to infantile pre-oedipal...an emotional field, tied to the instincts, which dwells on the fissures and prosody of language rather than denotative meanings of words". It is irrational, radical, poetic, and rhythmic often falls outside the boundary of logical grammar of language. Judith Butler speaks of "dissedimentation" and "performativity" as ways of turning central, hierarchical and transcendental upside down. Though their proposition of new ways of undoing literature suffer from certain failings and inconsistencies and to point out them demands a protected session (which right now is impossible), they shatter our understanding of what is natural, unchallenged ways of doing literature.

However, here I introduce my own notion of how to perform resistance to the dominant and I call it "becoming nomad", a radical libidinal economy which deconstructs and disrupts teleological and hierarchical axis of any epistemological structure. For the formulation of this new way understanding of literature and criticism, this essay is much indebted to Deleuzian philosophy which speaks of immanence, nomadism, schizophrenia to challenge our hierarchical oedipal thinking. Becoming nomad as a new way of conceptualizing literature shares proximity with "becoming women" or "becoming animal" and it does not suppose imitating animal in the literal sense; rather it propounds a criticism of structuralist binarism separating two different and opposite ideas where the former occupies the centre and the latter is thrown into the periphery. OED defines nomad as "a member of a people that travels from place to place to find fresh pasture for its animals and has no permanent home" and the synonyms

associated with are 'traveller' 'migrant' 'wanderer' 'wayfarer' 'gypsy' 'bedouin'. If we pay close attention to the words they reflect a semantic of transition, flux and restless mutation and distortion of identities. In a way, the nomadic thinking challenges philosophical and political totality and teleological positivism of modernism. The writings of Salman Rushdie are prime example where his fictional characters are going through endless metamorphosis, problematizing identities, transforming boundaries and denaturalizing the "imagined" nature of nationalism. Rushdie, while commenting on this liquid nature of art says "No aesthetics can be constant, except the aesthetics of inconstancy, metamorphosis or to borrow a term from politics "perpetual revolution" (IH). Midnight Night's Children's Salim Sinai exemplifies the author's philosophy of immanence, profaning the sacred territory of nation, religion, identity and exposing the illusion of its certainty and the claim of naturalness. He says in article *In Good Faith* about his novel *The Satanic Verses* "If *The Satanic Verses* is anything, it is a migrant's-eye view of the world. It is written from the very experience of uprooting, disjuncture and metamorphosis (slow or rapid, painful or pleasurable) that is the migrant condition, and celebrates hybridity, impurity, intermingling, the transformation that comes of new and unexpected combinations of human beings, cultures, ideas, politics, movies, songs. It rejoices in mongrelization and fears the absolutism of the Pure." (Rushdie, 1991)

Let's take recite another example of Wachowski Brothers' the movie of the Matrix trilogy *The Matrix* (1999). Set in

future dystopic world, this movie beautifully illustrates the predicament of modern mankind living in 'society of control' (Deleuze- Postscript on the Societies of Control) imprisoned in a virtual world of information controlled by artificial beings. The endeavour of Neo and his fellow hacktivists, who are committed to a politics of freedom and emancipation from these artificial machines led them to penetrate into this system and disrupts its overarching panoptic system. Here in this film, Neo and his fellow characters put forward a message for the writers and intellectuals to shoulder an ethical burden to be engaged in a politics of justice and freedom. However this film, somehow, suffers from a fallacy of transcendentalism in its depiction of a diametric demarcation between the reality and the virtuality. In an interview Zizek has explicated in his usual paradoxical manner

The choice between the blue or the red pill is not really a choice between illusion and . Of course The Matrix is a machine for fictions, but these are fictions which already structure our reality. If you take away from our reality the symbolic fictions that regulate it, you lose reality itself. (...) I want a third pill. So what is the third pill? Definitely not some kind of transcendental pill which enables a fake fast food religious experience, but a pill which would enable me to perceive not the reality behind the illusion, but reality in illusion itself.

Our fundamental delusion today is not believing in what is only a fiction, to take fictions too seriously – on the contrary, it is not taking fictions seriously enough

which will enable one to fathom, of course being embedded within the system' the reality of the virtual and the virtuality of the real. Actually, such a straightforward structuralist borderline between real and virtual, between fact and imagination is always obfuscated by the limitation of epistemic faculty. Their problematic relationship reflects a similarity with the geometrical design of Mobius strip which subverts our traditional notion about space, time and reality.

The aim of this resistance is to precipitate the occurrence of an “event” (Badiou, 2006), an ontological disruption in the fabric of reality. According to Alan Badiou, reality is based upon void of inconsistent multiplicity and the state or the dominant ideology covers up this through master signifiers. But this suppressed and excluded reality remains hidden beneath this apparent status quo and normalcy. An Event happens when this foreclosed or suppressed appears/attacks in the social scene, disrupts its functioning and opens up a space to rethink the ontological nature of reality and its multiple alternatives. In his article *Alan Badiou: The Event* Andrew Robinson sums up basic concept of Event "In an Event, the inconsistent multiplicity which always lies beneath a particular social order is able to appear subjectively. Only in an Event can the excluded part be visible. An Event succeeds in representing a part which is previously unrepresented. This unfolding of new representations from an Event produces Truths, Subjects, and new social systems". Badiou directs our attention to French Revolution or October Revolution in Russia as two examples of Events and they epitomize the attributes of an Event.

One question which may ensue from the above reflection on nature of resistance-how long will it continue? Doesn't the idea of resistance suffer from positivist transcendentalism? Roland Barthes's insight into these problematic offers a solution to this enigmatic quagmire or impasse. His opinion concerning literature's role in influencing human experiences emanate from an existentialist

point of view who defines writer's role to be a tragic one resembling Sisyphus in Greek mythology who is eternally condemned to roll back a stone up to top of the mountain, only to fall it back again. According to him the writer, just like mythical Sisyphus, must invent techniques and language, however futile it may seem, to prevent this assimilatory capacity of the system.

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