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BA English Honours | Semester V | Calicut University

Foundations of Literary Theory

Course Code: ENG5CJ302 • Module 3 Notes

Module III: Marxism and Feminism

1. Marxist Literary Theory & Historical Materialism

Marxist critical theory originates in the dialectical materialist philosophy of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels. Marxism rejects idealist notions that literature springs from timeless spiritual truths or detached artistic genius. Instead, Marxism asserts that literature is an ideological product rooted in the material conditions, class struggles, and economic modes of production of a specific historical epoch.

- **Base and Superstructure (Basis und Überbau):**
  - *The Economic Base:* Comprises the Forces of Production (raw materials, physical tools, industrial technology, human labor) and the Relations of Production (the socioeconomic class divisions, ownership of capital, employer-employee hierarchies).
  - *The Superstructure:* Encompasses society's legal, political, religious, philosophical, educational, and cultural institutions—including literature and the arts. In classical Marxism, the economic base conditions and determines the ideological superstructure.
- **Class Struggle & Alienation (Entfremdung):** History is propelled by class conflict (bourgeoisie vs. proletariat). Under capitalism, workers are alienated from the product of their labor, alienated from the act of production, alienated from their fellow human beings, and alienated from their essential human creative nature (*Gattungswesen* / Species-Being). Literature often reflects or masks these profound alienations.
- **Commodity Fetishism & False Consciousness:** In capitalist societies, social relationships between human beings are masked as objective economic relationships between inanimate commodities. Ideology naturalizes this exploitation, inducing "false consciousness"—a distorted perception of reality that leads the working class to accept their subjugation as natural, moral, and inevitable.

2. Ideological State Apparatuses & Cultural Hegemony

Twentieth-century Western Marxism dismantled mechanical economic determinism, developing sophisticated theories of ideological dominance:

- **Antonio Gramsci: Cultural Hegemony:** Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci introduced *Hegemony* in his *Prison Notebooks*. The ruling capitalist class maintains power through a dual mechanism: *Coercion* (direct physical violence deployed by the army and police) and *Consent* (ideological hegemony engineered through civil society, schools, media, religious bodies, and cultural literature). Literature is an ideological battlefield where hegemony is both naturalized and contested by "organic intellectuals."
- **Louis Althusser: Ideological State Apparatuses (ISA):** French philosopher Louis Althusser distinguished between the *Repressive State Apparatus (RSA)* (police, military, courts, prisons—functioning by direct physical force) and *Ideological State Apparatuses (ISAs)* (churches, schools, family, literature, the arts—functioning invisibly by ideology). Ideology operates through **Interpellation** (hailing): society constantly addresses individuals, recruiting them into compliant subjects who believe they freely choose their assigned roles.

3. Feminist Literary Theory: Waves, Sex vs. Gender & Patriarchy

Feminist literary criticism interrogates how literary texts reinforce, naturalize, or subvert patriarchal oppression, exposing the political dimensions of gender, language, and power:

- **The Waves of Feminism:**
  - *First Wave (Late 19th - Early 20th C.):* Focused on legal, political rights—women's suffrage, property ownership, and institutional education (Mary Wollstonecraft, Virginia Woolf).
  - *Second Wave (1960s–1980s):* Explored systemic domestic oppression, reproductive rights, sexuality, and the workplace slogan "the personal is political" (Simone de Beauvoir, Betty Friedan, Kate Millett).
  - *Third Wave (1990s–2000s):* Embraced post-structuralism, intersectionality, queer theory, dismantling essentialist notions of universal "womanhood" (Judith Butler, bell hooks).
  - *Fourth Wave (2010s–Present):* Digital activism, online feminist networking (#MeToo), body positivity, and dismantling institutional misogyny.
- **Sex versus Gender (Simone de Beauvoir):** In *The Second Sex* (1949), Beauvoir formulated the foundational feminist maxim: **"One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman."** Feminism draws a sharp distinction between biological sex (chromosomes, physiological anatomy) and gender (the socially constructed, performative behavioral roles, expectations, and dress codes imposed by patriarchal society).
- **Patriarchy:** An overarching social, legal, and economic system wherein men hold primary power, dominate roles in political leadership, moral authority, social privilege, and control of property, while women are relegated to secondary domestic status.

4. Contemporary Feminist Paradigms: Intersectionality & Écriture Féminine

Contemporary feminist thought expanded beyond early white, middle-class Western frameworks to embrace radical polyvocality:

- **Intersectionality (Kimberlé Crenshaw):** Introduced in 1989, intersectionality demonstrates that systems of oppression do not operate independently. Race, class, gender, caste, sexuality, and disability intersect to create unique, compounded matrices of marginalization. An impoverished Dalit woman encounters structural violence vastly distinct from that faced by a privileged upper-class woman.
- **Écriture Féminine (Hélène Cixous):** In her revolutionary 1975 manifesto *The Laugh of the Medusa*, French theorist Hélène Cixous proclaimed that patriarchal language is rigidly "phallogocentric"—linear, hierarchical, and repressive. Cixous commands women to write: **"Woman must write her self: must write about women and bring women to writing... Woman must put her self into the text—as into the world and into history—by her own movement."** *Écriture féminine* is bodily writing, fluid, non-linear, rhythmic, and subversive, celebrating maternal "white ink" to shatter patriarchal syntax.

Advanced Critical Theory, Epistemological Debates & Hermeneutics (Extension Phase 1)

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and poems; it interrogates the very foundations of meaning, human subjectivity, ideological state power, and the historical conditions under which texts are produced and consumed.

1. Core Epistemological Paradigms & Theoretical Cleavages

Literary theorists and critical philosophers navigate fundamental theoretical debates within Module 3:

- **Autonomous Form versus Socio-Historical Determination:** A central intellectual division contrasts New Criticism and Russian Formalism (which treated the text as an autonomous, self-contained verbal icon) with Marxist and Cultural Materialist criticism (which insists that literature is determined by economic base structures, class contradictions, and historical forces).
- **Humanist Essentialism versus Post-Structuralist Anti-Humanism:** Classical liberal humanism viewed the author as a sovereign, intentional creative genius endowed with a stable core identity. Post-structuralism (Roland Barthes's "Death of the Author", Michel Foucault's "What is an Author?") dismantled this romantic myth, demonstrating that the "author" is a discursive construct and that language speaks through the subject rather than vice versa.
- **Universalism versus Postcolonial & Intersectional Particularity:** Eurocentric critical traditions long posited Western aesthetic values as universal human truths. Postcolonial theorists (Said, Spivak, Bhabha) and Black feminist scholars (bell hooks, Crenshaw) deconstructed this epistemic violence, revealing that universalist claims erase the historical specificities of colonial conquest, racial violence, caste oppression, and patriarchal hegemony.

2. Comparative Analytical Matrix: Major Theoretical Schools & Key Concepts

A structured comparative assessment delineates performance metrics and theoretical axes in Module 3:

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Structuralism	Language as an autonomous relational system of differential signs.	Arbitrariness of sign; Langue vs. Parole; Binary Oppositions; Syntagmatic/Paradigmatic.	Ferdinand de Saussure (*Course in General Linguistics*), Roman Jakobson, Claude Lévi-Strauss.
Psychoanalysis	The unconscious; desire, repression, and psychic formation of subjectivity.	Id/Ego/Superego; Mirror Stage; Imaginary/Symbolic/Real; Lack and the Gaze.	Sigmund Freud (*The Interpretation of Dreams*), Jacques Lacan (*Écrits*).
Marxism & Ideology	Materialist base-superstructure relations; class conflict and power hegemony.	Commodity Fetishism; Ideological State Apparatuses (ISA); Cultural Hegemony; Interpellation.	Karl Marx, Antonio Gramsci (*Prison Notebooks*), Louis Althusser, Terry Eagleton.
Post-Structuralism	Instability of meaning; critique of logocentrism; deconstruction of binaries.	Différance (differ/defer); Discourse/Power/Knowledge; Rhizome; Incredulity toward metanarratives.	Jacques Derrida (*Of Grammatology*), Michel Foucault, Jean-François Lyotard, Gilles Deleuze.

3. Glossary of Theoretical Terms & Critical Frameworks

Critical Term	Theoretical Origin	Standard Theoretical Definition & Application
Defamiliarization	Russian Formalism	*Ostranenie*: Making familiar objects and language appear strange or unfamiliar to refresh perception and overcome habitual blindness.
The Mirror Stage	Lacanian Psychoanalysis	The developmental moment (6–18 months) where an infant misrecognizes its fragmented body in a unified mirror image, initiating an illusory ego.
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