



**A bi-annual peer - reviewed journal of Department of English and Cultural Studies, Panjab University, Chandigarh**

*Marxist Literary Criticism Today* by Barbara Foley (Book Review)

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Even though it has been more than a few decades since the academic culture and theory wars of the 80's and 90's are supposedly over but the publishing industry continues to profit from the never ceasing demand for continuous new titles that ease, or at least claim to ease, the average man's difficulty in grappling with the recondite subject matter and prose of much cultural theory. In such a writing/ publishing climate of plenitude, it becomes increasingly challenging for an author to write a novel account of such an overdone topic as Marxist literary criticism. But more than the challenge where is the space for such a book when its subject matters' appeal is itself in the doldrums? Barbara Foley's new book strives to challenge this notion. It argues for the continued relevance of Marxist criticism in the reading of literature and culture, even if, globally, the attraction of Marxist politics may be on the wane. Of course, this cry is not new. For instance, Terry Eagleton, the go-to academic for Marxism, in his ever-expanding critical oeuvre, has attacked the practical impotence of post-structuralist and attendant exercises. Be that as it may, the decline of the 'post' approaches and the discussions on the future of criticism appear not to provide much credence to or space for any grand resurgence of political readings. Ideology critique and symptomatic reading which have had a long and remarkable career in the humanities have lost their sheen in the assessment of those who wish to foreground the much-neglected affective dimension of literature. This includes works of the queer theorist Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick which initiated an attack on what Paul Ricoeur calls the 'hermeneutics of suspicion' on which much of Marxist criticism is predicated. Following Sedgwick, a lot of rigour and persuasion can be found in Rita Felski's *The Limits of Critique* as well as *Critique and Post Critique*. Notwithstanding this disenchantment with the erstwhile ubiquity of approaches in literary studies such as ideology critique or paranoid reading, Foley seeks to draw our attention once again to the scope of 'revolutionary social transformation by the study of literature and culture from a Marxist point of view'. The author has divided the 265- page book into two parts and six chapters. Much of the book, though especially the first part, is dedicated to the explanation of the central tenets of Marxism such as historical materialism, political



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economy, and ideology. Here the book displays the rare ability to excite and engender interest in the philosophical abstractions of theory while simultaneously engaging readers' attention even though thematically there is not much variety on offer. Foley has the authority of a master given her long association with revolutionary theory and pedagogy as her other works keenly demonstrate. She has also done proper justice to her book title by being attentive to the state of the world today; there are regular references to not only the much more recent political and popular culture events but also scholarship which stands complicit with the status quo like that of Jordan Peterson. She then brings to our notice the ways in which Marxist theory can help us understand the now and help create an alternative hegemony. This implies recognition of the historicity of capitalism, how it is not a natural order, and its inherent instability which leads to frequent market crises such as the 2008 financial meltdown. What the book also calls to consider here is the 'continuing need for classless future' given that the alienation and inequalities spawned by the present socioeconomic system pushes the average man today to seek shelter in religious fundamentalism and extreme nationalism. The second part of the book not only explores perennial questions such as the meaning of literature, and the function of literary criticism, but also attempts to delineate Marxist literary criticism for the uninitiated. There is an additional chapter on Marxist pedagogy which examines individual texts to show how the Marxist approach can lead to a deeper and meaningful engagement with literature and how class analysis continues to remain relevant. Usually, introductory books that cater to the student demographics of culture studies tend to focus less on the practical, exposition part, and most students remain confused about the linkages between reading and theory. What makes the book even more wholesome is Foley's attention to both highbrow canonical texts and popular literature. For instance, she picks up *Fifty Shades of Gray*, the phenomenon of our times, and marks the ways in which this novel steeped in capital conceals the workings of the capital, i.e., the alienated labour behind the making of the cherished products and 'the history that hurts'. But even a text such as *James'* which lacks depth becomes exciting in the Gramscian and Jamesonian reading of Foley where a political unconscious, however limited, is shown to have existence. When it comes to classics Foley's reading remains virtuoso; she deftly analyses how Jane Austen and Edith Wharton like E.L. James present a myopic view of commodities evading any mention of exploited and alienated labour that brings coffee to



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the table and sapphires to the wrist – items that are fetishized in these supposedly timeless narratives. Subsequently, she pits these writers against Toni Morrison, Richard Wright, and Langston Hughes who demystify the intricacies of class and racial inequalities and who evoke the pain and suffering behind the creation of wealth enjoyed by a select few.

This is the strength of this book. Foley performs a virtuoso reading of canonical and non-canonical texts which other than steering careful note-taking will also inspire her readership.

The subject matter of Barbara Foley is not new. There have been ample number of books by the likes of Terry Eagleton, Raymond Williams, Tony Bennett, and many others. The value of Foley's book lies in its assumption that a solid understanding of the basics of Marxism is imperative before the reader is led to its hermeneutics. It is fairly detailed, quite lucid and accessible, gives ample joy to its reader even as she learns to review the canonical and the popular in novel, critical ways. Although there is no apparent focused readership which the book targets but as much of the book pivots around literary criticism, it will find more takers among the university going lot, especially students of literature and culture. It will certainly be of great help for the average student who had Terry Eagleton's thin albeit influential account of Marxist literary criticism but found the prose and the arguments on the denser side, even if the account provided frequent comic relief in the form of Eagleton's characteristic witticisms.