

A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF 'SLUM CHILD' BY BINA SHAH, UNDER THE MARXIST THEORY OF REFLECTIONISM BY GEORG LUKACS

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Abstract

Slum child by Bina Shah is a reflection of class struggle in Pakistan; it reflects how the residents of Issa colony and Ansari house represent their class. This aspect of the novel invites attention that the novel be read from Marxist perspective. Georg Lukacs' theory of Reflectionism can aptly be used as a tool to analyse the novel for new interpretation(s). Reflectionism theory emphasizes the negative effects of capitalism and maintains that art is a "reflection" of the base and a piece of the superstructure, making literature a tool to perpetuate class structure. The research is qualitative in nature: it makes textual analysis of the novel whether or not it conforms to the claim that literature is part of the meta narrative or the status quo. The novel portrays the plight condition of Zainab and her family who face problems after problems because of being a low working class and having no access to medical treatment, education, satisfactory food and even basic necessities of life unlike the Ansari's who enjoy unlimited wealth, the most modern facilities and fame in Pakistan and abroad. Bina Shah looks, through the novel, raises her voice against the bourgeoisie's exploitation that seems determined not to provide any chance to the working class to come out of their downtrodden miserable condition.

Keywords: Bina Shah, the bourgeoisie, the proletariat, Reflectionism

INTRODUCTION

Marxism theory is based on the assumption "forces of production, the way goods and services are produced, will, in capitalist society inevitably generate conflict between social class, which are created by the way economic sources are used and who profits from them. Consequently, the struggle between the bourgeoisie who control the means of production and the proletariat, who render their services for their wages, arises" (Jameson, 1971). The struggle has two aspects physical and ideological. Marx refers to this contradiction as dialectical materialism. The Marxist is aware that the working class does not recognise the system in which it has been caught. The bourgeoisie represents prevailing class logic, natural, justified, universal and inevitable. The proletariat is put into the sense of identity, worth, community as though they mentally accept their low position. The conflict of the class system is predicted by Marx himself, will breakdown the capitalism and establish a classless society one day. The means of production would be held in common ownership for common good, divided by the state in which neither will be oppressed nor oppressing but equal status.

The germinal source of the Marxist theory 'Reflectionism' is the analysis of symbols and images present in Russian Formalism which is applied to the texts in the attempt of revealing class conflict and to expose the

direct relationship between the economic base and the superstructure reflected in art.

Reflectionism theory named after the assumption that a text will reflect the society that has produced it. It is based on the close reading and discovering how characters and their relationship typify and reveals the class conflict, the society in which the text is written. It includes the socioeconomic system and politics of time and place.

Reflectionism theory emphasizes the negative effects of capitalism and maintains that art is a “reflection” of the base and a piece of the superstructure, making literature a tool to perpetuate class structure. Because of this, reflection theory analyses an author’s worldview, and social consciousness in order to demonstrate the text’s relationship with the base and superstructure, and to show that the text’s characters fall into their stereotyped historical and socioeconomic condition. The theory is based on the kind of closed reading advocated by formalists.

Slum Child is also an artistic piece of literature in which the author reflects class struggle between the working class and the elite one (The proletariat by the bourgeoisie).

Bina Shah, the author of the novel unfolds a number of problems of the society because of the class struggle in capitalism system is a root cause of social and economic problems.

The Marxist reflectionism theory of Georg Lukacs and the other related theories of Marxist i.e. Althusser’s, describes Literature and Art affecting the society, even lead it to revolution and agrees that the working class is manipulated to accept the ideology of the dominant one, a process he called interpellation.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The issue of class difference has been addressed by many sociologists and Marxists from different point of view. The class difference studies aimed at analyzing the factors involved in highlighting the difference between the bourgeoisie and the proletariats under different social and cultural conditions. The class difference was first time highlighted by the famous philosopher and sociologist Karl Marx.

Engels (1887) reveals the huge difference between the industrial working class and those who own the industries. He further highlights that the industrial workers have lower income than their pre-industrial ones, are compelled to live unhygienic and unpleasant environment.

The theory of the reflectionism encompasses the problems of the society created by the author through his/her work of literature that actually relate real life.

Shah as a literary writer has contributed to Pakistani literature with a number of novels, short stories and articles. Her work reflects different aspects of human society; problems of young generations, problems of capitalisms, problems of Pakistani based foreign and problems of women due to the gender discrimination in Pakistan.

Shah’s work ‘Slum Child’ reveals the class struggle and the problems created by the class difference in Pakistani society particularly Karachi based extremely low working class and the highly rich class. Her work reflects the class struggle based problems as others following the Marxist reflection theory.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study qualitatively analyzes the text under reflectionism theory by Georg Lukacs. The researchers carefully examine the text to identify the class struggle following social and economic problems. The text is clearly divided into two parts the first is replete with the proletariat problems and the second with bourgeoisie luxury. The textual data is critically reviewed and then discussed how the base and superstructure is responsible to perpetuate the status quo or class difference in the society created by the author.

THE AUTHOR AND THE NOVEL

Bina Shah is one of the new generation postmodern writers. She is Wellesley and Harvard alumna, is a noted Karachi based author, editor, blogger and feminist. She is the author of four novels: *Where they Dream in Blue* (2001) *The 786 Cyber Cafe* (2004) *Slum Child* (2010) *A Season for Martyrs* (2014) and two

volumes of short stories. Besides, she writes columns in Daily 'Dawn' the best newspaper of Pakistan on social and gender issues faced by Pakistani Society.

'*Slum Child*' consists of two parts and 16 chapters. First eight chapters depict the downtrodden characters i.e. Zainub, Laila, Jumana, Haroon, Najeeb, Irfan Chacha, Saleem etc. who belong to the proletariat and the other part begins with 'Mansion' and depicts the bourgeoisie along with their servants.

'*Slum Child*' is a tale of the harsh reality of extreme poverty against the opulence of the rich. It gives glimpses of miseries surrounding those poor creatures called Slums. The protagonist of the fiction is a nine year girl 'Laila' who lives in Slum called Issa Colony in Karachi. She is spirited, aspirated and intelligent. She has a beloved sister Jumana who she looks after being tuberculosis patient. Her mother Zainab works for the rich Ansaris as a maid. Jumana died of tuberculosis after fighting a long panged fight. Zainab suffers from an emotional collapse after Jumana's death whereas Laila discovers that her feckless step father is planning to sell her to Saudi Sheikh. Running away is the last option left for Laila to save her honour and chastity. Thus she flies to the Ansari's house for working and protection where she is given responsibly of looking after little Sasha, a baby girl of Ansari's house. But disaster comes in her life when swam of honey bees sting Sasha. The whole family of Ansari's turns against her; she has no option but to flee again. But where to flee, this time, and how to face terrible violence and threats waiting for her outside the Ansari house. At last she leaves for slum again with Jahan and Mariam and manages to save her from Sleem (a wicked friend of her step father Irfan Chacha) who waits for her in her house to sell her to Saudi Sheikh to settle the account he owes from Laila's step father. At last she married to Najeeb, a Pathan boy who helps her in her miseries.

DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS:

APPLICATION OF THE MARXIST THEORY OF REFLECTIONISM

Marxism has a long and complicated history. It was often thought that Marxist phenomenon came into 20th century and has the bases in the government system in Soviet Union. Actually it was 19th century when Karl Heinrich Marx (1818-1883), German philosopher and economist, introduced German ideology in 1845 and the concept of dialectical materialism. It argued that the means of production control a society's institutions and beliefs and contended that history is progressing toward the eventual triumph of communism.

Georg Lukacs (1885-1971) was one of the major Marxist critics who became famous for his theory of 'Reflectionism' claims that the author's created society can be judged with the parameter of his theory Reflectionism. The researcher finds Shah's (2007) *Slum Child* fit to be critically analysed under the theory.

The world created by the author in the text reflects class struggle. Low working class belongs to slum area whose job is to run after their livelihood to sustain life. The author of the novel portrays the slum children as they were like the mosquitoes that were born every summer in pools of stagnant rainwater, hatched from sprinklings of larvae that floated on the scummy surface. They were all like insects that teemed and buzzed and flew from one pile of rotting garbage to another" (Shah, 2007, p.51).

The economic condition can be understood well from Laila's (protagonist of the novel) view about Essa Colony's inhabitants' occupation "Those of slum who could read had a huge advantage over those who couldn't: they found clerical work and enjoyed an elevated status over the rest of their fellows. In the colony hierarchy, the lowest of the low were the ones who had to beg on the streets. Just above the beggars were who sold combs or newspapers and, once in the while, humiliating items like balloon or the fake beards (ibid, p.64).

The author creates thrilling chaos of Jumana's contracting tuberculosis, her continuous blood spitting, groaning with pain for long time and her ultimate death after fighting with the disease without medical treatment is a big question mark on capitalism system. Her mother could not pay for the treatment of tuberculosis being expensive even they were unable to have access to the local dispensary of the area. On the contrary, when Sasha is bitten by swam of bees, rushed to the best hospital of the city; her father comes from Dubai suspending all his activities. They don't care about money but want to save their baby's life. Their class and money are proved blessings for saving their baby's life. But, at the time of Jumana's illness her mother being the proletariat tries her best to save Jumana's life but fails because of deprived class. She requests her Madam (owner of the Ansri House) for money in advance. The madam accepts the request but gives a meagre amount, insufficient even for medical tests. Thus, being the proletariat Jumana dies and

being the bourgeoisie Sasha survives. How the destiny proves fatal for Jumana and kind for Sasha in Karachi, is a question mark for class system in capitalism system.

Zanaib's family always worries about two times meal usually they have Daal (pulses) to eat and go to bed without food whereas the Ansari enjoys sumptuous meals daily and they also invite their elite fellows for luxurious dinners where they serve them uncountable dishes and the huge remnant of meals goes to garbage which can be sufficient for those who go to bed without food.

Laila envies schooling of Jehan and Maryam who study in one of the richest school of the city whereas she used to study in a government school without resources and facility. (ibid.p.162)

The textual study reflects manifold problems created by capitalism. For example believing in non-existent healthcare systems (false religious pirs) who claim to treat the patient of all disease with their verses of Holy Quran etc. ultimately Jumana becomes the victim of the religious pir who applied last injection of white colour liquid and suffocates her with smoke created from burning liquid. Selling of virgin girls by the wicked like Irfan Chacha to Saudi Sheikhs; involving in drug addiction of young boys, religious hatred, sex abusing, human trafficking etc. are revealed as evils of capitalism system in the text.

The drug addicts get all kinds of drugs from every hook and corner but layari is famous with the drug addiction as Laila expresses Layari was where the drug gangs also lived, and heroin was cheaper than bottled water (ibid.p.130).

The slums of Issa colony, being poor, disowned by the state, ignored by the society, deprived of basic their rights feel inferior and good for nothing. On the contrary Ansari's being bourgeoisie, owners of boundless wealth, welcomed nationally and internationally, enjoying life full of luxury feel superior beings create a vast vacuum between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie.

The author's society has drawn a clear line between two classes as discusses above, creating binary opposition as a result of Capitalism. This situation supports the Marxist view of class system that is responsible of base and superstructure which creates social and economical problems in the society.

In capitalism, implementation of law differs for the poor and the rich as reflected in the text: At the time of accident when the policeman orders Ismail (a driver of Ansari's) and the other who collided his car into that of Ismail's to show him their driving licence and that he is going to take both of them to the Police station; Ismail informs him that he is one of the Ansari's driver and the policeman let him go. Mariam, the Ansari's daughter who was sitting with Laila in the car at the time of accident get scared of taking to the police station. She said, "No, Laila, he'll see that we're girls and he'll take us to there, I don't want to....."

Laila consoled Maryam that she didn't have to worry about being raped at the police station. That was a fate that awaited only those who were poor, or stupid like me. No not even like me—we Christians in the slum knew better than to go the police for anything. (ibid.p.191)

Laila being a maid faces humiliation before Jehan and his friends while serving them cold drinks her feelings are expressed as: I put the tray of drinks down on the Jehan's beside table. Then I pulled my dupatta up onto my head, as high as it would go and backed out of the room. The door closed behind me as a burst of laughter's rose behind it, and the tears sprang hot and hard to my eyes. I knew suddenly what it felt like to be a slave, where your pride was as insignificant to your owners as a fly sitting on the back of an elephant's head (ibid.p.205).

TABLE OF CLASS DIFFERENCE	
<u>The Ansari's (The Bourgeoisie)</u>	<u>Zainab /Slums/servants (The Proletariat)</u>
a. Countless dishes are cooked and eaten in Ansari's house.	a. Laila feds up of eating same food every day.
b. Ansari's Sashah is treated in the most expensive hospital when bitten by swam of honey bees and survives.	b. Jumana's mother cannot afford T.B treatment and tests expenditure of Jumana and she dies.
c. Mariam and Jihan study in the most expensive school of Karachi.	c. Laila, cannot study in a good school.
d. In Ansari house numerous expensive	d. Zanaib's family hardly afford public transport.

<p>vehicles are available.</p> <p>e. Ansari family is privileged with all luxuries of life.</p> <p>f. Ansari's keep about 20 servants at a time for their service</p>	<p>e. Zanaib and her family are compelled to live in Slum area.</p> <p>f. Zanaib and her family work as a maid.</p>
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CONCLUSION

The text reveals that the class difference makes this world narrow and creates chaos for those who work at low level (the proletariat) and is blessed for those who own means of production, (the bourgeoisie). The writer reflects both the classes very artistically and the problems created because of them. The Marxist theory of Reflectionism is aptly applied to the textual society. The plot of the characters develops clash between the low working class and the elite one. It also reflects how the two classes make their society quite differ from each other and get opponent. The one who always work hard through out their life like Zainab but cannot achieve but subsistence and the other enjoy countless luxuries on the others labour.

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