

## **Marxian Literary Debates and Discourses**

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In his classic text *Considerations on Western Marxism*, Perry Anderson pointedly referred to the efflorescence of literary theories and aesthetic texts, based on the basic principles of Marxism, in the interwar years and after the war. In fact, he specifically mentioned the names of Georg Lukacs, Theodor Adorno, Walter Benjamin and, above all, Antonio Gramsci who published – to use his adjective – ‘dazzling’ texts which examined brilliantly the social moment of a work of art as well as its indispensable autonomy. Lukac’s study of Thomas Mann and Kafka, Gramsci’s critique of contemporary Italian theatre, specially the productions of Pirandello’s plays, Adorno’s pathbreaking analysis of the music of Beethoven and the lyrics of Goethe; and, last but not the least, Benjamin’s evaluation of Charles Bandelaire’s poetry --- all these, along with many other texts written by other fellow-travellers belonged to this gamut of multifaceted efflorescence. In the same essay Perry Anderson tabled an important theoretical postulate by stressing that the more the communists lost in the two crucial spheres of economics and politics, the more they submerged themselves in creative texts and theories as a compensatory venture.

I personally think that there is a link or similarity between Western Marxism and Bengali Marxism in this particular context. Marxists and Communists of Bengali, and their fellow-travellers, also wrote at times ‘dazzling’ ‘critiques of creativity and the quantum of these texts increased appreciably when their direct influence on the state and nation’s politics waned. However, even after appreciating this intense engagement with creativity and aesthetic principles, we need to note that Bengali Marxism failed to produce its Benjamin or Adorno. The best example of this Bengali creative commitment is the poet and scholar Bishnu Dey who not only wrote inspiring poems but also breakaway critical texts on Tagore, Michael Madhusudan Datta and Boris Pasternak. He enunciated a Bengali sociology of literature and creativity with the help of his seminal essays.

Two specific examples of his critique-oeuvre underline his profound importance. He was the very first in Bengal to point out definitively the clear

limitations of the so-called Bengal Renaissance. Indeed, he posited the creativity of Michael Madhusudan in the particular colonial context and declared that it was not possible for Michael to proceed even further in a colonized and socio-politically constrained set up. The second example is still more illuminating. In his classic text ‘*Ī[ġ[ġŸ³VĐXçŪ C × `”αç×c÷āTōī %çWġç×XEōTōçĪ[ġ a]aīç*’ he showed us how a genuine Marxist ought to regard and evaluate Tagore. His redemptive politics received an explicit expression when he stated at the end of his long essay that the circle drawn by Tagore was completed by Bertolt Brecht, especially in the latter’s poems. It is worthwhile to note here that Adorno, Marcuse and Bishnu Dey chose the same poem of Brecht describing the soaring flight of cranes as the ultimate marker of absolute creative freedom. There was, therefore, a union of minds.

Bishnu Dey had some, though few, genuine friends on his side like Hiren Mukherjee and Asok Sen. But the weight of his detractors was certainly more. In point of fact, the internecine war that is the cultural debate rose to such a pitch, that the poet and critic had to start his own magazine *Sahityapatra* which was guided by the following fundamental principle : place the creative act or writing within its ‘social moment’ and after that wrench it out free to evaluate its autonomy. Those who belonged to the opposition – to name only two – Pradyot Guha and Saroj Datta – were neither influenced nor moved by Bishnu Dey’s poems and critical texts. Indeed, this Bishnu Dey bashing percolated down to the seventies when Diptendu Chakravarti and Iraban Basu Roy severely criticized the poet’s creative output as “far too esoteric, erudite and bafflingly complex”, hence out of the reach of the simple middle class, workers and peasants. This estimate clearly proves that Marxian cultural debates and discourses which began in the thirties of the last century and which recorded its apex in the forties and the fifties, did not die out later. That is, it continued till the seventies, though with less vigour.

In short, Bengal had and still has its fair share of Lunacharskys and Zhdanovs who engaged and still engage in razor-sharp polemics. Dhananjoy Das has done the admirable task of compiling these texts and arguments into one, massive volume (previously it had run into three volumes). When one delves into this book one receives a clear picture of the entire history of literary debates that began in the thirties and reached its apex in the forties and fifties. Divided into four sections, the latter crisscross into one another in the book. From Pradyot Guha’s *αç×c÷Tōī ×[ġ»đðçāĪ[ġ ]çEīōaŸĪ^ Y^ ù×Tō* to self-criticism of progressive literature; from

Buddhadev Bose's *Marxism in Bengal: A Study of the Early Discourses and Debates* to Abu Sayeed Ayub's *Marxism in Bengal: A Study of the Early Discourses and Debates* - the range and depth of this volume is truly outstanding. I have deliberately included the names of Buddhadev Bose and Abu Sayeed Ayub – both non-Marxists – in order to underline the broad and non-sectarian nature of this publication. Anuradha Roy, on her part, has written an excellent and rigorous commentary on the book, which is titled '*Bengal Marxism. Early Discourses and Debates*'. I shall be referring repeatedly to these two seminal texts while writing my paper.

### **What do I propose to do :**

- (1) Write a summary of this entire history of literary debate and discourse.
- (2) Choose the preponderant themes that mark out this debate and deconstruct them as they are found in the two books, one edited by Dhananjay Das and the other by Anuradha Roy. In other words, I shall single out the thematic patterns and deconstruct them.
- (3) Select appropriate quotations from the texts and organise these according to the thematic patterns. These quotations, in fact, will serve as an index to the total debate and its branches as well as sub-branches.
- (4) Concentrate on the texts of dramatic production in order to pinpoint the differences of means and methods. For example, I shall compare Utpal Dutt's *Towards a Revolutionary Theatre* and Sambu Mitra's *Prasanga Natya* in order to cast light on their contrasting and different dramaturgies.

### **Violence in the Seventies**

Marxian cultural debates have not always been peaceful exercises of the mind, attitude, vision and weltanschauung. In the early seventies of the last century, a new dimension was added to these by acts of 'cultural revolution' indulged in by the Naxalites. Debunking the so-called Bengal Renaissance as a thoroughly retrograde movement, the over-zealous Naxalites also debunked the illustrious figures of this so-called Renaissance as a corollary. Iswarchandra Vidyasagar, Rammohan Roy and even Rabindranath were denigrated as compradors and their statues were beheaded or smashed. Nevertheless, a few senior Naxalite politicians like Sushital Roy Chaudhuri condemned and questioned this destructive zeal. Comrade Saroj

Datta, on the other hand, who had held a sectarian view right from the forties supported the move. There is no doubt that the middle class Bengali roundly criticized this act of destruction. Their sympathy for the Naxalites waned to a large extent who were seen as irrational iconoclasts indulging in senseless violence.

The last section of my essay will highlight this violence cum debate that raised its clumsy head in the early seventies.

### **Addressing Queries**

While evaluating the texts and documents, I shall be prompted to address queries raised by the texts themselves. The following could be the relevant queries :

- 1) To what extent and in what ways creativity inspired by the party differs from creativity which is also committed but not directed by any political party ?
- 2) Should the political party, communist party in this context, grant sufficient autonomy to the creator and his creativity ?
- 3) What is the dividing line between party-dictated literature and autonomous creativity which is also committed and salvational ?
- 4) Like Lenin and Lunacharsky, should the leaders of the party also concentrate on the fusion between form and content or should it stick to the narrow view that hails propaganda literature only, underlining thereby merely the content and not style or form ?
- 5) How should the committed writer view and estimate his literary tradition ? Here again, should he take the cue from Lenin's evaluation of Leo Tolstoy ?
- 6) Is it wise to seek or depend on patronage extended by the ruling left ?
- 7) To cut the long story short, should the writer cherish his autonomy as the sine qua non of genuine creativity ?

### **Conclusion**

This abstract could wellnigh end by quoting from two poems which spontaneously raise the wall between overtly political, party-dictated even propaganda literature, on the one hand, and genuine committed poetry where the



castigated Bishnu Dey, Samar Sen and others as thoroughly bourgeois and even decadent. With the advance of time, however, Pradyot Guha softened to a marked extent and regretted what he had said earlier.