

Reading Social Reality through Fiction: A Take on Dystopian Literature that Critiques and Constructs Marxist Theories

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ARTICLE INFO

DOI:

10.61081/vjr/15v2i106

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Keywords

*Dystopia, Marxism,
Literary fiction, Social
theory, Sociology*

How to cite:

Sidharth, S., (2025).
*Reading Social
Reality through
Fiction: A Take on
Dystopian Literature
that Critiques and
Constructs Marxist
Theories. Vivekananda
Journal of Research,*
15(2), 143-148

ABSTRACT

Social theories have a key function of criticizing social conditions or political systems. While raising these questions, theories also warn us against the potential negative consequences of utopian thought. Interestingly, one may observe that dystopian works of fiction serve the aforementioned key functions of theories as well. Speaking of Social theory, few can claim to have left an impact on it as deep rooted and widespread as Karl Marx. Further, Socialism and communism, concepts that carved out strands in intelligentsia and also changed the histories of nations, are without doubt credited to Marx. These are also ideas that are often accused of being utopian. This essay shall aim to place literary fiction in the equation with social reality and theory by looking at how fictive narratives critique and construct Marxist theory. The observations have been made by taking the broader themes of George Orwell's *Animal Farm* (1945), Ayn Rand's *Anthem* (1938), and Franz Kafka's *The Trial* (1925) that are important 20th century novels addressing Marxist theory. The reading of aforementioned novels shall be done while keeping in mind Karl Marx's *Communist Manifesto* (1848) and *German Ideology* (1848).

INTRODUCTION: FICTION AND SOCIAL THEORY

Social theories are fundamentally concerned with interpreting and critiquing social reality. They seek not only to explain existing social arrangements but also to caution against the dangers inherent in idealized visions of society. Dystopian fiction, though often relegated to the domain of literature, performs a parallel function by dramatizing the consequences of political and social ideologies when translated into lived reality. As Susan Visvanathan (2011) observes, fiction can operate as a sociological metalanguage that communicates complex ideas in forms accessible beyond academic discourse.

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This paper places literary fiction in conversation with Marxist social theory to examine how dystopian narratives critique, reinterpret, and sometimes reconstruct Marxist ideas. Rather than treating Marxism as a monolithic doctrine, the essay highlights its multiple interpretations and practices, revealing how fiction illuminates the disjuncture between theory and implementation. Dystopian authors ranging from Ayn Rand to George Orwell and Franz Kafka, and several more, have written comprehensively about the perils of various elements of Marxist theory, such as collectivism and communism, in their fictional works. These works aid the layman in getting acquainted with how disastrous or virtuous a theory can be in practice. Most often, owing to the immense use of imagery in dystopian works like those mentioned above, the novels are definitely more engaging than scholarly theories.

This essay, in essence, seeks to trace how theory is deeply complemented by fiction. Criticism of certain brands of Marxism is discussed in three best-known dystopian novels of the 20th century, which have been chosen for this analysis. The first novel is George Orwell's 'Animal Farm', while the second is Franz Kafka's 'The Trial' and the last is Ayn Rand's 'Anthem.' An important aim here will also be to see how Marxism does not function as a single brand but in many contexts with various practices. Such analysis can even aid one in understanding the theory-practice equation in general.

MARXISM, UTOPIA, AND THE PROBLEM OF PRACTICE

George Orwell's *Animal Farm* is a novel discussing the lives of animals in a society, living on a farm. One should not be misguided by the book's title, which suggests it is merely about animals, for the book at large is an in-depth analysis of human nature and behavior, especially under a socialist regime. Animals in the novel are mere puppets to illustrate how humans function, how early influential leaders like Stalin used propaganda, and how such leadership molded the behavior of people. Orwell never denied that socialism is an ideal but acknowledged that it could never be successfully implemented owing to the overpowering evils of human nature. Notably, Orwell's writing can demarcate the differences between Socialism and

Stalin's interpretation of it, for the author believes in the virtue of the former while critiquing the latter.

Like George Orwell, Franz Kafka also builds his story around a Marxist nightmare, but Kafka never quite reveals the nightmare. *The Trial*, for instance, maintains a rather disoriented picture till the end, where even the highest officials are kept in the dark regarding rules and help, if at all it comes, comes from unexpected sources. The novel is superficially about bureaucracy but does not fail to highlight the absurdity that "normal" human nature may subsume under a socialist regime.

It would be interesting to take up the example of socialism, which deeply echoes in *Animal Farm* and suggests its presence in *The Trial* as well, and see it in relation to the questions of theory and practice.

Ayn Rand strived to publish *Anthem* at a time that is often referred to as the height of the Red Decade in America and the struggle she faced doing the same itself introduces the stand point she had on Communism, which, in her words, had 'intoxicated' the intellectuals in America during the late 1930s and onwards. Ironically, it took America, the ultimate country of individualism, a great amount of time to have this novel of individualism made available to them.

The story of *Anthem* was conceived by Rand as a teenager in Soviet Russia but it must not be assumed that Rand wanted to write an anti-Russian story, for what one finds in the novel is a strong condemnation of the general communist ideology and not just the Soviet Union. To put it very simply, Rand saw Communism as the loss of civilization and equivalent to slavery.

Critiquing communism and collectivism on several grounds, Rand's fantasy novel is set in a communist society of the future, which has experienced a 'great rebirth.' The actors here only use the word "we" and other collective pronouns as the word 'I' has been lost or rather, hidden, as one can conclude towards the end of the novel. Rand essentially builds a theme of communism being an illusion of freedom which is in sheer contradiction to the claims of communism as spelled out by Marx. The radical critique presented by Rand openly accuses communists of living in denial and not coming to face the logical implications of common ownership

of the means of production. One may observe Rand viewing the ideals of Communism such as social aims, social gains and social objectives as mere facades to conceal the exceptional limitations of communism.

The institution of private property, according to those leading the socialist movement of the 18th to 19th century, carried a market-based system of human association, as a consequence of which it brought out the evils of individualistic behavior in people. Such an institutional order, then, if changed, could also create a new kind of man free of the evils of individualistic behavior. So, the socialist ideal pictured a society where the individual didn't concentrate on his sole well-being and betterment but rather worked for the larger society.

But the core conception of Marxist communist thought lies in assuming that the nature of man can and very well should be made to change. One often tends to miss the deliberate misrecognition of such arguments made by Marx, which are also downplayed in the vast body of his theory and most often entirely missed in the practice of Marxist ideology. It is in novels like the ones under consideration that such missing links and gaps of theory and practice become starkly visible.

Marx (1846) unveils his argument of historical materialism in *German Ideology* where he states that all history would be prehistory until the four stages that ends with capitalism. Marx's typology of society was based upon progressive differentiation of division of labour. He divides the history of human society into four major stages- Pre-class society, Ancient world, Feudalism and Capitalism.

Marx throughout his writing in *German Ideology* paves a way to Socialism which he compares to the ideal kind of society, he believes that Socialism will be the revolution that will rescue the proletariats from constant subjugation and exploitation and therefore will end their cycle of poverty through class consciousness, Marx (1948) pens down *The Manifesto of the Communist Party* to give a framework for the succeeding generations. He specifically discusses the workings of the socialist society that will come after the downfall of capitalism and the changes that institutions would undergo in this new mode of production.

Although he failed to predict or assess that the proletariat would accomplish class consciousness, Marx didn't shy away from acknowledging the dilemma that even after the

overthrow of the capitalist mode of production, residues of the preceding system would pervade the new socialist society. The human remnants of the now discarded capitalist mode of production must be the first concern here. A few of them would definitely want to restore the system that enables exploitation of workers for their own fraudulent profit gains. Further, the 'working class', although now free from the 'false consciousness' prevailing under the capitalist system, can certainly not be free of the capitalist psychology of personal gain and self-interest. 'Dictatorship of the proletariat' was, thus, the way out of such a potential self-contradiction.

The practice of socialism, as now gone down in history, shows that every corner of everyday life – its characteristics, form, quality, or content – was bound by the control and determination of the all-encompassing socialist state that had all power. Such a state in its design and attempted implementation was truly 'totalitarian.' More problematic is the tendency when the powerful argue that they have only been implementing what the masses have been wishing for all along, but have never expressed. This is especially the case with socialist states, which constantly remind the population that the now apparently equal society was a dream of the people. With such claims, it often gets difficult to highlight the hypocrisy that is the suppression practiced by the dictatorship of the proletariat, which is a dictatorship. Bureaucratization, corruption, surveillance, etc., are the by-products and indicators of such socialist societies that are often laid as broad themes in the dystopian novels. It is thus easy to see how *The Trial*, *Anthem* and *Animal Farm* resonate with those living under a dictatorship.

Franz Kafka's texts commendably stand the test of time and although he has been exaggeratedly called a prophet for foreseeing a great number of aspects that shape today's world, one can simply not deny the power narratives have to constantly draw readers closer to their social settings. In 'The Trial', we are grippingly driven into a story of fear and pursuit where it seems like a nightmare that

even we share, despite most people in the postwar west never having been subjected to anything even bordering on such an extreme. It is nevertheless true that readers under soviet states imagined a situation that they knew too well, in which the fundamental rights of the individual had been snatched away.

Not very far from the brilliance of Kafka's texts lie George Orwell's texts that have time and again highlighted the gap between theory and practice. A very peculiar theme that emerges in reading both authors is how an unbelievable amount of stress is laid on maintaining certain facades in communist and socialist societies. For example, in *Animal Farm*, Squealer is the pig who is made to communicate every piece of information to the other animals on behalf of the pigs who represent the dictatorship in the satire. Squealer is chosen for this job owing to his perfected diplomacy and ability to play with words that can keep the animals from any enlightenment. Similarly, in *The Trial*, the information giver in the Court's offices is more fashionably dressed than any other official and another employee in the office explains to Josef K. how all officials in the office had insisted that the information giver must dress the best because he was in direct contact with the public. Narration of such instances gives us peep into the mundane and minute mechanisms that uphold an entire regime.

FICTION AS A SOCIOLOGICAL METHOD

A key advantage of literary fiction being rooted in social reality is its ability to bring the finer lines of ideology to the front. Marxist theory at once comes across as the best example of how the multiple strands in a humongous body of theory can have multiple implications. This more prominently matters as Marx was particular about theory always being united with practice. The essence of this argument can be found in the famous eleventh thesis on Feuerbach: "Philosophers have hitherto only interpreted the world in various ways; the point is to change it." It becomes clear here that Marx was not discarding philosophy or calling it irrelevant; he was saying that philosophical problems or even ideas, for that matter, spring from real-life circumstances. Thus, the philosophical problems can be solved by changing the real life conditions

and in a sense, remaking the world, necessarily a socialist world.

Factually, many of these Marxist ideals were indeed endeavored to be put in practice, shaping a new world in some countries. These were what are referred to as Soviet societies. One can endlessly debate about the true meaning of "Marxist" and what qualifies as Marxist be it in reference to societies, political movements or even individuals. Now, it becomes important to see that Marxist revolutions did come to pass after Marx died but not exactly where or how he imagined they would, and this happened in his name. For instance, Classical Marxism advocates for the direct action of the workers (self-organized, not with a vanguard party). Marx himself would most likely not have supported the Soviet Union and Red China that emerged. In fact, Marx theorized for the revolution to take place in a highly industrial country, which was neither the case with Soviet Russia nor Red China. Nevertheless, if one looks at the mid-twentieth century, populations that said and believed themselves to be Marxist, crossed one-third of the world.

The point, thus, is that while the theory-practice gap gives way to ambiguity, the finer lines of

where theory's limitations shy away from practice get displayed in full view when a literary fiction deals with it, owing to being influenced from particular social contexts. Kafka, for example, critiques a certain brand of Marxism and not Marxism in its entirety. This is a differentiation that a large portion of classical as well as contemporary theories are unable to communicate being laden with pressures of generalizations.

Although falling outside the immediate focus of the current essay, Bertolt Brecht's work on Marx and his complex relationship with the thinker also makes an argument for the vitality of literary fiction in constructing and critiquing Marx's theories. Brecht had a strong conception of Marxian dialectics, influencing his aesthetic theory and practice. The conception was rooted in the influence of his "Marxian" teacher Karl Korsch who was pertinent about materialist dialectics and revolutionary practice as conceived by Marx. His position was also the reason why Korsch was among the first victims of Stalinism in 1926 and was expelled from the socialist movement.

One cannot help but consider the work of Roland Barthes (1957) here. Semiology, Barthes interpreted as being concerned with any system of signs, whatever their substances and limits. Under this he highlighted images, gesticulations, music, ritual, objects of material culture, conventions and spectacles. These were forms of communication (or systems of signification). Barthes argued that given the nature of the modern world, such a form of analysis was crucial. Novels not only represent the material culture of a society in great detail but also stand the test of time as a part of such signs of signification themselves. This is even more apt for dystopian novels. Fiction, thus, emerges as a material culture representative of our society. It becomes an object of our civilization, especially given its mass appeal. When theorists like Clifford Geertz (1973) have gone ahead to argue that everything is a symbol and everything can be analyzed, fiction only becomes a champion option to study social reality.

Seeing Fiction in the light of what Barthes or Geertz have said, we arrive at the entire question of culture, which is imperative to a great number of theories, if not only to the fact that theorists essentially theorize certain things in very certain ways owing to even more certain cultural contexts. Raymond Williams (1977) argued that culture is ordinary. He threw light on a phenomenon called the structure of feeling and by placing such an emphasis on lived experience, he opened whole swathes of aspects earlier considered culturally insignificant to the lens of sociological study. The reading of literary fiction may find itself at the front of such consideration.

One cannot deny Sociology's uncompromised concern for realism despite the discipline's abstractness. There are grand narratives written in abundance on marriage and children, property and death, etc. as a part of sociological recording. However, to write well about everydayness of existence is a talent quite set apart and required in the works of fiction. Sociological analysis is a skill of intellectuals and theorists definitely, but its beauty lies in how everyone is empowered with it. Fiction, then, becomes a great tool for equipping ordinary people with skills to utilize their sociological analyses. Translation of fiction, thus, also becomes a tool for equipping the masses with a form of analysis.

An interesting aspect related to sociological analyses empowering most ordinary people is that of theory phobia. Theory phobia, if encapsulated most simply, is the fear of a supposed abstractness that is attached to theory. Theory is most often intimidating to a much larger segment of the population, even when this segment is constituted by educated individuals. The emergence of such a phobia owes to the theory having severe scientific and empirical connotations. Fiction, on the other hand, can be accessed (especially in terms of comprehension) by the wider population. Under fiction, the absence of a compulsive objectivity offers better scope to argue for or against a theory, thus largely eliminating theory phobia.

Max Weber's (1922) concept of *Verstehen* is one of the earliest things we learn about his contribution to social sciences and 'to empathize' (as one may translate the term) is essential to sociological analysis as well as to the eventual construction of Sociological theories. Understanding others' mental states is a crucial skill that enables the complex social relationships that characterize human societies. Yet little research has been done regarding what may foster such a skill, known as **Theory of Mind** in academic terms. Just how such a Theory of Mind may be enhanced by engaging with works of art, one can certainly see how reading literary fiction also goes a long way in understanding others' mental states. This essential empathizing of scenarios and situations is yet another step away from the pseudo-objectivity obsession that social science in general and Sociology in particular has taken to. Here, it also becomes vital to highlight the difference of literary fiction's impact on the mind as such from that made by non-fiction or pulp-fiction.

The vitality of literary fiction as a sociological source as well as a theoretical resource can and should be reiterated every now and then simply because it can depict the features of an epoch, to describe a social context or a peculiar social atmosphere (for example the suffocating court rooms stacked away in attics of dingy residences as shown in 'The Trial'), to anticipate trends, social transformations and changes. Carefully placing weight on the rhetorical dimension of narration, one may notice that fiction is not merely a story told but also a set of values transmitted and reinforced. It therefore does

not seem fair to merely pass a narrative as mere sociality. One must look deeper and acknowledge that it is one of the ways whereby social reality is reproduced, value systems are strengthened, and behavioral standards are confirmed. Even though the focus of this essay lies in literary fiction, the former holds true both for everyday narratives like folklore or even what later comes to constitute oral history and literary narratives.

Those keen on matters of objectivity and factualness as such are found accusing fictive narratives of not having an identifiable referent in the “real” world. That is, the whole question of how something lacking truthfulness can be considered as a theoretical and sociological resource? The crux of the matter, however, lies in literary fiction still producing rich, culturally determined documents. Excluding these as sources for our sociological understanding, on the basis of a misplaced quest for referential truthfulness is, –if nothing more– a naïve step taking us back to the age of positivism.

Addressing the concern that Sociology holds towards realism, it is evident that literary fiction contributes to constructing our sense of reality, the way we perceive events and relations. Borrowing from Berger and Luckmann, we may see reading social reality through fiction as an endeavor to free the whole idea of objectivity from science and bring it closer to everyday human life. Such an institutionalization, then, can make the essence present in specific works of fiction an objective reality.

CONCLUSION

An interesting way to conclusively place literary fiction in the equation with social reality and

theory would be to consider theorizing with the question of terminology. An often downplayed but necessary to acknowledge fact is that fiction not only borrows elements from theories and social environments to describe social types and social phenomena, but also creates its own social types and social phenomena that aid theorizing. Emerging from literary fiction, these concepts too become available for social use, whether in theory or in everyday narratives. That is to observe that while a certain phenomenon can be classified as Marxist, another phenomenon can as legitimately be called “**Kafkaesque**”, a term that is an essential part of our vocabulary today simply owing to the power of a fictional narrative that could resonate with elements of social reality.

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