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Marxist Reading of Daniyal Mueenuddin's Short Stories of His Book "In Other Rooms Other Wonders"

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Abstract:

Marxist critics expatiate about the causes and effects of socioeconomic burdens. Most of the people in Pakistan lead their lives under the pressure of socioeconomic conditions. These socioeconomic forces function overtly and covertly and always exist. These factors shape the characters and the lives of common poor people and impel them to become a "prey" to "economic stability and prosperity". Most of the time, these forces metamorphose people into something unacceptable for society. Marx's ideas about society in particular and Marxism, in general, have been touched to conduct the present research. Three stories from Mueenuddin's book "In Other Rooms Other Wonders" have been analyzed because these stories present true Pakistani society. The in-depth analysis unveils the changes and effects in the lives of common people due to the economic factors. The research will prove efficacious to bring the pragmatic changes in the society through the critical investigation of these effects.

Keywords: Marxism, oppressed, socioeconomic, society, common poor people, economic stability.

1. Introduction

Reading Daniyal Mueenuddin's mesmerizing first collection, "In Other Rooms, Other Wonders," is like watching a game of blackjack, the shrewd players calculating their way beyond their dealt cards in an attempt to beat the dealer. Some bust, others surrender. But in Mueenuddin's world, no one wins (Sofer, 2009).

No one wins because all characters are caught in the web of oppressed socioeconomic conditions. "In Other Rooms Other Wonders" is a collection of eight loosely linked short stories. The stories revolve around the servants and relatives of K.K Harouni. Each person has a different story. The present study deals with three short stories, naming, "Nawabdin

Electrician," "Saleema" and "About A Burning Girl". All three stories have one common element, and that is "struggle" for economic stability. This "struggle" makes Nawabdin callous, dishonest and corrupt, changes the poor person into a robber, transforms Saleema from human being to the sex toy, and frames criminals in the characters of Khadim, his brother, and their wives. The characters in these stories live and die for economic stability.

The story "Nawabdin Electrician" is, about a poor and corrupt electrician Nawabdin who works day and night for the marriage of his daughters. One day a robber tries to loot him and gets injured by a shot. They both are taken to a nearby clinic where the doctor treats Nawabdin only. The robber dies in the clinic.

Story "Saleema" deals with the character of a downtrodden girl Saleema who uses his body to gain economic stability, but in the end, dies in poverty and oppressed conditions.

In "About A Burning Girl", readers meet those sons, Khadim and his brother, who rob their own father with the help of their wives. The cruelest part of this story is that Khadim's bother burns his wife in fear of her confession. Khadim's brother is caught and his father and brother try to save him because of their own interests and the session judge, in the story helps them because of his own benefit. Entangled in the threads of their interests, they all want knots of economic prosperity and uplift to survive in the society.

Mueenuddin has written these stories in the context of Pakistani rural and urban areas. These stories reveal the period of the 70s, 80s and 90s. AS Mueenuddin remarks,

But that's what fiction writers do--write about others' lives. I am not writing about Daniyal Mueenuddin's life (The New Yorker, March 3, 2009).

The working of oppressive socioeconomic forces has been described through the poor and wretched conditions of characters without being explained. These forces are deciding factors at the time of every critical moment in the lives of these characters. As the judge remarks in the story "About a Burning Girl":

I render decisions based on the relative pressures brought to bear on me (Mueenuddin 92).

In the present study, the actions of characters have been analyzed in the light of Marxist standpoint to find out the pressure of socioeconomic powers upon them.

Karl Heinrich Marx (1818-1883) was a German philosopher, social scientist, historian, economist, sociologist, journalist and revolutionary socialist. Marx puts forward the perception that all mental and ideological networks are the products of social and economic existence.

His first book *The German Ideology* came into sight in 1845. In this book, he argues that the institutions and beliefs of society are controlled by, means of production. In 1844 in Paris, Marx met the political economist Friedrich Engels and found that they both had same views independent of one another. They decided to work collectively to make intelligible the ideas of communism which they later regarded as Marxism. They also made up their mind to systemize an international campaign. Their book *Communist Manifesto* appeared in 1848. They opine in the book that class struggle is a dynamic force behind history. According to them, this class struggle would escort to a revolution in which workers would turn the capitalists upside down, dominate the economic production, and exterminate private property. In his book *Das Kapital* (1876), Marx asserts that history is determined by economic conditions.

Marx believes that economic uplift is the basic and sole purpose of all human activities in society. The material interests of the supreme social class direct how people see human existence, individual and collective. He states that “forces of production” shape society. Therefore many Marxists today allude to socioeconomic class rather than economic class. From a Marxist point of view, the economic differences in a society create class conflict. The real difference is between the “haves” and “have-nots” apart from any other differences in religion, race, ethnicity, and gender. He announces, “The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles” (14). A collective understanding of all the Karl Marx’s views on economics, politics, and society is called Marxism. Another famous personality in the evolution of Marxism is Althusser (1918-1990) who states that working class is manipulated by dominant class to accept its ideology. Currently, two of the famous Marxist critics Fredric Johnson and Terry Eagleton are working in this field.

In the book “*In Other Rooms Other Wonders*” all the characters in Pakistani society work for their economic prosperity and stability. Socioeconomic factors determine their struggle and way of living. These factors are not described in clear cut ways in the story, but the working of these powers behind every action is quite clear. The study deals with the causes and effects of the actor’s measures taken for the economic stability due to the social set-up. The study can prove useful to mould the society into the right direction.

1.1. Research Questions:

Following research questions have been discussed in the study:

- In what ways oppressive socioeconomic forces affect the lives of common poor people in the stories?
- How do the circumstances in the stories invite us to condemn oppressive socioeconomic forces?

2. Literature Review

Daniyal Mueenuddin's stories have been discussed from the prospects of social, economical, political and cultural facts by different critics and researchers. "Daniyal Mueenuddin's first collection of short stories, *In Other Rooms, Other Wonders*, straddles both east and west, rural and urban, upper and lower class, just as the author has in his own life"(Cline,2012).

In Mueenuddin's world, people want to be involved in politics to get a higher status in society. Crain 2012 asserts that in Mueenuddin's stories everyone struggles for politics and this fight shapes them and makes them sufferer (3). People of different classes do their struggle to raise their status, but especially the characters of women have been discussed many times as agents of sex to get their purposes. Sofer (2009) states, "The women in these stories often use sex to prey on the men, and they do so with abandon at best and rage at worst — in this patriarchal, hierarchical society, it is their sharpest weapon. Women in the lower classes sleep their way up only to be kicked back down, while those in the upper classes use their feminine influence to maneuver their husbands into ever-growing circles of power until age corrodes their authority". Whether they belong to an upper class or middle class, they want to be strong economically for different purposes. "Servants' tales focus on the precarious position of poorer women in contemporary Pakistani society – their desperate need to make strategic alliances with men, their ultimate dependence upon them. Sometimes these relationships are based on love, sometimes love grows from something more mercenary. Sometimes neither happens, but for as long as these partnerships last, women have security (and, in the confined world of the relationship or the household, a little power). However, as soon as the relationships end – usually as a result of illness or death – the women are cut off, cast out" (Smith,2009)

However, the stories are not about the struggle of women alone, almost all the character male or female, from lower or higher classes seem struggling. "These connected stories show us what life is like for both the rich and the desperately poor in Mueenuddin's country, and the result is a kind of miniaturized Pakistani "human comedy"" (Dirda, 2009).

Kausar Bilal in 2012 has written the review of book "In Other Rooms Other Wonders" by Mueenuddin. In this examination, he talks about the sexuality of women, the greed of men and corruption of all the sections of society.

The idea of American Dream, the ideology of economic prosperity has also been discussed about Mueenuddin's book. Cline (2012) claims that the notion of American Dream can easily be traced out in his stories.

Masters and servants play their roles in Mueenuddin's collection of short stories. In the words of Ambreen Hai, "He is interested, then, less in what servants can tell us about the

constitution of the upper classes or how elite subjects are formed or understand themselves, and more in interrogating a system that is taken as normal and in de-normalizing it, in making visible and questioning what is usually taken for granted” (4).

Mueenuddin in stories is concerned with all the classes. Sohomjit Ray (2010) says: “Mueenuddin’s reach and expanse within his limited frame is extraordinary. His sweeping gaze conjures up a remarkably unsentimental vision of the poorest underclass (“Nawabdin Electrician,” “A Spoiled Man,” “Saleema”), the rich upper class still adapting to a new world that has no place for a feudalistic lifestyle (“In Other Rooms, Other Wonders,” “Lily,” “Our Lady of Paris”), and those in between (“Provide, Provide,” “About a Burning Girl”” (92).

Mueenuddin in these stories talks about inequality in society. It has been stated in KIRKUS REVIEW (2010) that Mueenuddin has masterfully explored the “inequality” and “radical changes” with a particular reference to person and society in his book. In Lotusreads (2009), the different aspects of Mueenuddin’s book have been analyzed expertly too.

Whether, in his stories, he deals with the sexuality of women or struggle of men, with servants or masters, with upper class or lower class, all his stories in one way or the other touch Marxism. In the present study, the effects of oppressive socioeconomic forces on the lives of poor common people have been analyzed, and the aspect of socioeconomic force is also related to Marxism.

Much work has also been done with special reference to Marxism. Terry Eagleton is a living British literary theorist, who has done much work on Marxism. He in his book *Marxism and Literary Criticism* (2002) states, “Marxist criticism is not merely a ‘sociology of literature’, concerned with how novels get published and whether they mention the working class. Its aim is to explain the literary work more fully; and this means a sensitive attention to its forms, styles and meanings.” (2). Literature is a significant source to preach ideology which is an essential element of Marxism. Neither the mysterious inspiration is the base of literary work nor does the writer’s psychology make the work understandable. Literary works are the means to proclaim the ideology of age (3).

Economic circumstances have the biggest power in society. Ann B. Dobie (2011) affirms that according to Marxism economic force drives the people’s lives in society (87). Society, he asserts, is structured by “forces of production” (87). He has also given his extensive views about materialism vs. spirituality and class conflict in Marxism in his book *Theory into Practice*.

Socioeconomic differences are the base of class division in a society in Marxism. Lois Tyson has described different characteristics of five classes of American society, based upon socioeconomic differences. Tyson (2014) states ideology is the core tool in society to keep the

lower classes at a lower level without any force (56). Marxism is the best way to expose the ideologies. "Marxism works to make us constantly aware of all the ways in which we are products of material/historical circumstances and of the repressive ideologies that serve to blind us to this fact in order to keep us subservient to the ruling power system"(57).

Dr. Ahmad Taha, Dr. Abeer Zahra, Samer Al-khaoli (2008) state that the dominant ideology of ruling class is attacked by Marx and Engles. In a society, the people who are economically low work under the ruling class and this ruling class spreads false ideas to make them subjugate. These people have the power to do anything because they hold economy (238).

Economics is the base of society in Marxism, and economic prosperity is the sole purpose of Mueenuddin's characters in stories. Marxism works clearly in his stories.

3. Theoretical Framework

The present study is a qualitative exploratory research based upon the Marxist Criticism. Mueenuddin's book "In Other Rooms Other Wonders" is the primary source of the study. A close textual analysis of three short stories of this book, from the lenses of Marxism has been done to find out the necessary points. Some of the Marxist points have provided the base for this research. Those are:

1. According to the Marxist perspective, economic stability is the sole purpose of all the social and political actions. Thus, economics provides the base for all kinds of social and political ideologies.
2. Material causes are the motives behind all the human, social activities. So, the core of Marxist analysis is the study of socioeconomic classes in the relationship of economic power.
3. Literature is not written only for esthetic purpose in some timeless frame to be analyzed passively, but it is a product of socioeconomic conditions of the time and place in which it is written, based on the fact that human beings themselves are the result of socioeconomic conditions of their own time and location and author is one of them.
4. As, the literature reflects the socioeconomic conditions of the society, so it also invites the readers to criticize the oppressive socioeconomic conditions prevailing in it.

The critical stuff has been collected through the reviews written on the book "In Other Rooms Other Wonders" and from different research articles. Online articles have also been read to enhance the validity of the study.

4. Discussion:

Tyson (2014) asserts,

All human events and productions have specific material/historical causes. An accurate picture of human affairs cannot be obtained by the search for abstract, timeless essences or principles but only by understanding actual conditions in the world. Therefore, Marxist analysis of human events and productions focuses on relationships among socioeconomic classes, both within a society and among societies, and it explains all human activities regarding the distribution and dynamics of economic power (54).

In Mueenuddin's stories, characters' actions are determined by socioeconomic factors.

In his first short story "Nawabdin Electrification," Mueenuddin presents such a character, in the form of Nawabdin, who tries to secure his job by slowing down the electric meters. Nawabdin is a poor electrician and a father of thirteen children with twelve girls and one son. In a review of KIRKUS (2010), he has been called "overburdened father of several marriageable daughters." In Pakistani oppressive socioeconomic society, it is not even easy for a rich person to get the twelve daughters married and Nawabdin is a poor person.

If he had been governor of the Punjab, their dowries would have beggared him (Mueenuddin 2 and 3).

In Pakistani social system, it is considered necessary to arrange dowries for the marriage of the daughters and Nawabdin as a father of twelve girls, has a huge responsibility. So he has to guard off his employment even by some fraudulent activity. To make himself stronger financially, he also has so many other little means of earning, but all those are not even enough for him. Due to the oppressive socioeconomic system Nawabdin has become corrupt, dishonest and an earning machine even then he is not successful. Even to buy a motorcycle he has to request his master in a tricky manner. Ambreen Ali (2014) remarks, "Mueenuddin portrays Nawabdin as a likable opportunist" (13).

In the same story, the character of the robber is also a victim of the oppressive socioeconomic system. He tries to rob Nawabdin without realizing his economic condition. He only thinks of himself that he has needed something, and he has to get it by any mean. The readers feel sympathy with him when he says,

I was brought up with kicks and slaps and never enough to eat. I've never had anything of my own, no land, no house, no wife, and no money, never nothing. I slept for years on the railway station platform in Multan (Mueenuddin, 16).

He is a born poor. Tyson states, "Members of the underclass and the lower class are economically oppressed: they suffer the ills of economic privation, are hardest hit by economic recessions, and have limited means of improving their lot" (55). As he belongs to lower class, he

is compelled to become a robber at the hands of the oppressive socioeconomic system because he has no other mean for the survival of society. He seeks forgiveness from Nawabdin for his act and begs him to save him from dying, but Nawabdin refuses by saying,

My wife and children would have begged in the street, and you would have sold my motorbike to pay for six unlucky hands of cards and a few bottles of poison brew. If you weren't lying here now, you would already be in one of the gambling camps along the river (Mueenuddin 16 and 17).

The robber dies in the clinic, and Nawabdin refuses to forgive him. They both are dishonest, corrupt, cruel and cunning and at the same time victimized, oppressed and downtrodden. Dirda(2010) opines that every person in Mueenuddin's book is nefarious. They have become like this due to the socioeconomic system. In this story, the dishonesty, cruelty, corruption and poverty of these characters compel the readers to criticize the oppressive socioeconomic conditions.

In the story "Saleema", Saleema is a member of the family of "blackmailers and bootleggers". Those people came from India to Pakistan at the time of Partition, and unfortunately, their condition remained same in the new country. Economically, they belong to that section of society which always remains poor and oppressed, and they have to adopt all illegal means even for their survival. As they are the family of blackmailers and bootleggers, so the society is not ready to accept them as respectable and does not trust them.

Her father became a heroin addict, and died of it, her mother slept around for money and favors, and she herself at fourteen became the plaything of a small landowner's son. Then a suitor appeared, strutting the village on leave from his job in the city, and plucked her off to Lahore (Mueenuddin 19).

It has been opined in a review of Lotusread that a person belonging to such class, has the destiny to be insulted and exploited by everybody (2009). What type of a person she can become after belonging to that kind of family. She becomes "sensual, unscrupulous__and romantic." She wants financial security which her husband is unable to provide her. Kausar Bilal states that "poverty, insecurity and loneliness" and "desperation for a better future" make women concubines in Mueenuddin's stories (2012). For the financial security she first makes relations with cook Hasan, and when he leaves her, she attracts old Rafik towards her. She knows very well the status of Rafik in the house, that's why in spite of his age, she makes relations with Rafik and gives birth to his child to guarantee her financial security. She does not care that she is the wife of another person even her husband is only concerned with money. He asks "Will I still get my money?" (40) on knowing Saleema's decision of leaving her. On the other hand, Saleema does not want to be loyal to the person who is financially weak. She only wants money for her survival in that oppressed socioeconomic society. The most tragic and

unfortunate part of this story is that after doing so much immoral acts, she does not become financially strong. As Hasan in the story remarks:

You came with nothing, you leave with nothing. You've been paid and fed for some time at least. You have decent clothes and a little slug of money (Mueenuddin 50).

In the end, she dies in poverty, making her illegitimate child, a beggar. The oppressive socioeconomic conditions are mainly responsible for her tragic end based on the fact that throughout her life, she had been struggling for money to survive in society and became a sex toy in the hands of men. It has been reviewed in Lotuusreads that except sexual favours she has nothing to offer to men to move forward (2009). Her tragic end makes the oppressive socioeconomic conditions criticizable.

I don't believe in justice, am no longer consumed by a desire to be what in law school we called "a sword of the Lord"; nor do I pretend to have perfectly clean hands, so am not in a position to view the judicial system with anything except a degree of tolerance (Mueenuddin 91).

In the story "About a Burning Girl", the above-mentioned dialogue of a session judge shows that he has been affected mischievously in the socioeconomic society. The session judge in this story tells the narrative of the theft of his servant and tries to help him because "Good servants are impossible to find" (99). Servants are servants, not "human beings" due to their lower status in a society based on economic prosperity. Cline in 2012 writes in the review of his book that "the narrator is merely one small part of a complete system powered by kickbacks, favors, and clout." People belonging to lower class also take part of this scheme. Common poor people are usually exploited in the society, but whenever these people get a chance, they also become the exploiters and looters. The Khadim's brother tells the false story of stealing the money. The father does not want to give wealth to his sons and sons with the help of their wives steal the wealth of their father. The need of money has made them unscrupulous and amoral. They want wealth to be robust economically in the society. Khadim's brother also sets his wife ablaze because, in the words of Mian Sarkar:

Not only must they silence her, they also needed a victim, someone to whom they could ascribe the theft, and who would not talk. They panicked. Criminals are fools. The husband was the prime mover. He is, sir, a nefarious fellow. A man of poor morals (Mueenuddin, 104).

Moreover, Khadim's brother wants to save Khadim not because he loves his brother, but because of the fear of his confession. In the case of his confession they not only have to face punishment but also they have to lose all of the stolen wealth. Oppressive socioeconomic conditions have made them criminals, liars and plotters from ordinary commonplace people.

According to Tyson in a capitalist society people frame their relations with other people to develop them socially and economically (79). The judge and his wife's efforts in the same story to save a "servant," is also an attempt to prosper socially and economically. It also makes them "oppressed" under the socioeconomic system. They are "oppressed" under the economic burden of being powerful and influential "masters." The "judge" and his wife adopt every possible mean to save the "criminal" servant from punishment. This effort is in fact, an effort of saving a "social status" in the form of a servant. The crimes, lies, plotting, and unfair use of means, in the story, invite the readers to condemn the oppressive socioeconomic forces.

Conclusion:

The above discussion indicates that how oppressive socioeconomic impetus has forced the characters to live accordingly. They plan their lives under the pressure of these forces and become such type of people, as are not considered appreciative and lucrative for the society. As Craig Seligman (2009) states, "In a society where the rich own everything and the rest own nothing, corruption is a way of life — a necessity". Mueenuddin's society is a multi-coloured society under the umbrella of oppressive socioeconomic might. This might shapes the lives of characters, frames their decisions and exposes the adverse facets of society in which everybody slogs for economic uplift. Kausar Bilal(2012) states in his review that, in stories, each and every person is engaged in wrongdoing, fraud and ill-treatment. The characters live, expire, wrestle, endeavour and strive for the economic stability, which is gauged unavoidable in the society.

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