

RECONSIDERING MARXISM IN FREDRIC JAMESON'S *THE POLITICAL UNCONSCIOUS*: NARRATIVE AS A SOCIALLY SYMBOLIC ACT

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ABSTRACT

Fredric Jameson published his book *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* in 1981 using a wide range of theories including structuralism, deconstruction highlighting the significance of the political events in literature. Jameson's *The Political Unconscious* rejects the traditional view that literature can be created in isolation from its political context. He contends that political interpretation can be at the center of all reading and understanding of fiction. Jameson doesn't want the political perspective as supplementary method but rather as the absolute method of reading and interpreting the text. Jameson upholds the significance of the Marxist interpretative act, and uses the phrases "high yield" and "density." Jameson avers that Marxism is an "untranscendable horizon" that subsumes antagonistic critical operations. Jameson subsumes all other approaches within Marxism recalling Hegel's theory of history. In his new book he launched a materialist cultural studies adapting "Late Marxism of Lukacs, Bloch and Adorno" relying on the impact of political and historical forces on literature. Terry Eagleton (1986) praised Fredric Jameson thus: "The idealism of American criticism, *The Political Unconscious* established Jameson as without question the foremost American Marxist critic, one of the leading literary theorists of the Anglophone world" (Jameson 57). The critical reception of *The Political Unconscious* is very interesting. In the United States the book was quite influential but in Britain the response was rather muted. In USA the new interpretation of Marxism and the theories of postmodernism excited the scholars.

KEYWORDS: Structuralism, Deconstruction, Antagonistic, Subsumes, Interpretation, Marxism, Postmodernism, Perspective.

INTRODUCTION

Robert Young in his book *White Mythologies: Writing History and the West* (1990) identified three major aspects that changed the thinking of the radical thinkers of New Left of America. Firstly, Jameson published his book at a time when the poetics of deconstruction was shelved. Jameson had the critical insight as he used the Derrida's insight in his analysis of Marxism. Jameson's book led to "the Althusserian Revolution" (Jameson 37) as Jameson announced that Althusser was a great discovery. His book gave impetus to Althusserian reconstruction of Marxism and its impact in Marxian criticism. Once again Jameson puts faith in history and turned to Hegel who has described the various stages of history in his book *The Phenomenology of Spirit* (1807). Jameson comments thus: "Only Marxism can give us an adequate account of the essential mystery of the cultural past" (Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious* 19). Jameson emphasized the continued role of *The Political Unconscious* in the creation of literature. Jameson contends that Marxist critique must be the critical methodology that subsumes all other critical theories. He trends through post-war genres of literary criticism from Northrop Frye to Pierre Macherey and comes to the conclusion that all narratives are the versions of class struggle and that the Marxist critique is the only significant methodology. Marxian methodology helps to explain the cultural productions thrown up by the capitalist system; the Marxian approach is able to divine the "political unconscious" of class struggle that lies submerged in the glossy surface of the texts. Jameson argues thus: "that all class consciousness of whatever type is Utopian insofar as it expresses the unity of a collectivity" (Jameson 290). Jameson has expanded the scope of Marxist critique, of matter and materiality. Jameson has discussed three stages of Marxist critique; the first stage defines the class struggle as the "collective struggle" "to wrest a realm of freedom from the realm of necessity" (Jameson 19). Jameson expresses his solidarity with the struggles of the workers. He doesn't take into consideration merely the ideal of better living conditions or human rights but rather concentrates on the value of freedom. Giorgio Agamben in his book *The State of Exception* (2006) talked of "this struggle to live the well lived life" against the forces that constrain human subjects to bare life. Agamben talks of class struggle "as a power struggle by one group against a stronger one" implying the dominating force of the power structure. Michel Foucault had expressed the same

ideas in his book *Power* (1984). Frederic Jameson gives the Marxian account in this new book considering Foucauldian version of power. He was also influenced by Nietzsche in his discussion of consciousness and totalization. Jameson has great regard for history as he says that the “readings of the past are vitally dependent on our experience of the present” (x). Fredric Jameson talks about his understanding of “Late Marxism” and “the “Crisis of Marxism.” In the last section of his book Jameson circles again to Foucault “giving remarkable insight into the role of power and the struggles of the proletariat to achieve freedom” (90). Jameson has explored the nature of Marxian base form a new perspective. In his previous books such as *Marxism and Form* (1971), *Late Marxism: Adorno*, or *The Persistence of the Dialectic* (1990) he defined base as the whole system of capitalist exploitation. But in his book *The Political Unconscious*, Jameson discusses base as a form of materiality and matter. Jameson is now concerned about matter and not materialism in this book and the issue of freedom of the working classes. He has interpreted the literary texts from the point of view of a political perspective. A text for Jameson is a “reflection of the contemporary issues. Jameson contends that only Marxism can help us to understand the cultural past where” the seasonal alternation of the economy of a primitive tribe, the passionate disputes about the nature of Trinity can be understood. In this sense, any form of culture is politicized and “the assertion of a political unconscious... leading to unmasking of cultural artifacts as socially symbolic acts” (50). Class struggle is considered as physical and sensuous experience and Jameson confronts classic dialectical materialism and the Foucauldian genealogy of power. He says:

The properly Marxian notion of an all-embracing and all-structuring mode of production...and non-Marxist versions of total systems in which the various elements or levels of social life are programmed in some increasingly constructive way. (90)

Jameson discusses in detail the growth of socialism and says: “The total system of contemporary society reduces the options of resistance to the anarchist gestures, and the sole remaining ultimate protests to the wildcat strike, terrorism, and death” (90). Jameson lashes at the fantasy of totalitarian culture and the tendencies of the world to colonize the “last remnants and survivals of human freedom” (91). Jameson radically broadens the concept of Marxian “mode of production”, so that he projects an account of continuous cultural revolution” (95). Jameson focuses on the engine of historical change leading to Cultural Revolution in the society. He has also re-interpreted culture in his book which designates to the sites where these modes of production become antagonistic and the literary texts that are traversed “by a variety of impulses from contradictory modes of cultural production all at once” (Jameson 95). In this text the struggle of the working class is evident and Jameson notes that; “the notion of overlapping modes of production has indeed the advantage of allowing us to short-circuit the false problem of the priority of the economic over the sexual, or of sexual oppression over that of social class” (99). Jameson gives the slogan: “Always historicize” and this punch phrase is the nucleus of the book: “not class struggle alone, but an endless cultural and social competition between modes of production, and hence between cultural forms” (281).

In the first chapter entitled: “On Interpretation” Jameson offers a strong defense of his Hegelian-Marxist approach giving a critique of the limitations and ideologies of post-structuralism. He gives a critical insight into the Marxist impetration. His critical methodology remains one of inclusion and not of exclusion and rejection. The book *The Political Unconscious* proposes the primacy of Marxism from a global perspective: “the absolute horizon of all reading and interpretations” (17). In the first chapter of the book, Jameson has explored the relationship. Here Jameson was influenced by Jacques Lacan and Louis Althusser and the works of these two writes facilitate the project of Jameson. Jameson believes that Marxism is an absolute historicism providing the solution to all cultural problems. He believes that all deep structures can be rewritten in the form of a narrative articulating the true vision of history. Jameson firmly believes that the problems of historicism can be resolved only Marxism because Marxism tells about the “essential mystery of the past” as a single great adventure as he says: “for Marxism, the collective struggle to wrest a realm of Freedom from a realm of Necessity, only if they are grasped as the vital episodes in a single vast unfinished plot. (Jameson 20)

The major problem before Jameson is how to integrate all the disparate elements into a coherent whole and this is the major project of *The Political Unconscious*. The book is an attempt to “restructure the problematic of ideology; of the unconscious and of desire, of representation of history and of cultural production” (13) Jameson requires a mode of interpretation which can accommodate all “conditions of possibility” It is not possible to confront a text immediately “in all its fresh new as a thing-in-itself because the texts are already interpreted. Jameson says that the text is not important but its interpretation is important which “we may attempt to confront and appropriate” (10). Jameson claims that his approach is the “absolute horizon of all reading and all interpretation” (17). This approach is revolutionary as it transcends all prevailing modes of interpreting texts. The political or historical interpretation of a text is not casual; it is a serious reading as everything is political and social and no text is written outside society and away from history. Political events are inevitable part of life and society and the political nature of society is a reality of the modern world. The society is determined and regulated by the historical forces. Jameson argues that interpretation is essentially an allegorical act; allegory is understood as the rewriting of a text which provides the key to the understanding of

that text. Jameson suggests that allegory should be seen as a rare method for resisting the reduction of the collective to the individual. Interpretation of a text is unavoidable and all “the original philosophical systems or positions in recent times have in one way or another projected a hermeneutic which is specific to them” (61). Jameson believes that the task of interpreting a text is not an easy but the textual analysis is very helpful in understanding all the hidden issues of the text. The laborious interpretation of a text can only help to understand the hidden meanings and the symbolical significance of the images and stylistic techniques of a writer.

Jameson argues that psychoanalysis of “the only really new and original hermeneutic” (61). Psychoanalysis is not as the study of sexuality but the study of “desire.” Jameson insists on giving a detailed analysis of psychoanalysis, since the discovery of desire “as the very dynamic of our being as individual subjects” (65). Jameson’s political unconscious is different from Foucault’s individual psyche as he has substituted it for collective. He shifts from the study of the individual to the understanding of a society as a whole. His interpretative system is different from Foucault’s. Northrop Frye is his model and understanding the images, allegories and myths are very important to examine and investigate the text. Jameson “sees literature as the symbolic mediation on the destiny of community” (70). In his *The Political Unconscious*, Jameson relies on the Freudian conception of the unconscious, Frye’s conception of coactive life and Foucault’s conception of individual’s freedom. He evolved his own system of interpretation drawing together these diverse systems of interpretation. Jameson gives the concept of “deterministic contradiction” as in his *Marxism and Form*, he gave the concept of the “dialectical stock” In *The Political Unconscious*, the “deterministic contradiction” plays vital role in synthesizing the ideas of Jameson who comments thus: “The methodological requirement to articulate a text’s fundamental contradiction may then be seen as a test of the completeness of the analysis” (80). Jameson highlights in his book the antagonistic nature of language. He argues that language is a medium to articulate the contradictory positions of social classes. Jameson creates ambiguity while confusing the text to the real expression of the social and political set up in the capitalist society. Jameson in his early part of the book discusses, class, class consciousness, the role of history in the life of individual and society.

Jameson investigates the historical relationship and comes to the conclusion that class relationship is determined by means of production of a society. Edward Thomson in his book *The Making of the English Working Class* (1968) observes that Class consciousness designates “the way in which these experiences are handled in cultural terms: embodied in traditions, value systems, ideas and institutional forms” (Thomson 9). Jameson has explored the dialectical relationship between class ideology with the social classes. The values, ideas and traditions of social classes are an expression of historical processes. The texts will be seen to be “crisscrossed and intersected by a variety of impulses from contradictory modes of cultural production all at once” (95). Jameson (1983) discusses in detail the concept of “Cultural Revolution” and its historical significance:

Cultural Revolution will therefore be a moment of non synchronous development...a moment of overlap, of the struggle in coexistence between several modes of production at once” (3)

The Western Enlightenment is the result of long struggle of the people and is a part of the bourgeois Cultural Revolution. Through this long historical process people acquire new habits, new modes of life, the process of human consciousness. Jameson sees the notion of Cultural Revolution opening up “a whole new framework for the humanities” (Jameson 4). Jameson’s concept of political unconscious is a “collective conscious” and an expression of the process of history and in the Jungian sense a reservoir of mythical archetypes. Key mechanism of Jameson is the Marxian category of reification: Jameson says: “the crisis of the social totality is the result of the same phenomena reification, social fragmentation, the division of labor, taylorization” (190). Jameson wants to evolve a comprehensive Marxian theory encompassing all other theories. He argues that Marxist theory effectively describes all of human life. The notion of all human life is investigated by Jameson via Lukacs’ concept of “totality.” Lukacs asserted that the sum of all relations among people, cultures and the material world such as religion and the arts are related within the totality. He rejected the traditional concept of Marx’s base superstructure.” Jameson opines that the “totality must be understood as constantly changing” (Jameson 56). Art is born from ideology. However, and “art makes us see in a detached way, the ideology form which it is born, in which it battles, from which it detaches itself as art, and to which it alludes” (Jameson 301).

Social fragmentation is the result of social totality and Jameson argues that there is no difference between reification and fragmentation and the division of labor. Reification is the outcome of historical processes of differentiation, separation and division under capitalism. Jameson uses “the term repression and suggests that these traces have been repressed through the processes of commodity production” (294). Jameson argues that “ideology represents the imaginary relationships of individuals to their real conditions of existence” (294).

ATTACK OF CRITICS

The critics have lashed at Jameson trying to devise a theory totality of interpretation. He contradicts himself with this project as he relies upon a code which can articulate all human experiences. But Jameson denies that his theory is not in any way transcendent but is openly ideological. Its nature is comprehensiveness and its ability to explain the working of capitalism and the modes of production. Jameson gives the task of reading symbols that is difficult. Jameson proposes in *The Political Unconscious* a three –part system of interpretation. The first is the “study of forms” arguing that works of literature grows out of changing social pressures. The purpose of each form of literature is to solve at the contradictions enacted in social relations.

Jameson wants rewriting of Marxian ideology as it requires re-interpretation discarding all the traditional ideas of culture and consciousness. Only a rewriting can reveal the mystery of the intrinsic relation a text has with history. It can fit the text into its proper place in the total scheme of history and at the same time project it as an ultimate mechanism. The potential of a text can be explored through interpretation. In any literary product, the “rifts and discontinuities” in the text are symptoms of the repression by ideology of the contradictions of history into the depths of the political unconscious. In Jameson’s view what the Marxist critic does is to “rewrite” in the mode of allegory. Jameson came under the influence of Louis Althusser and favors aligning Marxism with contemporary theories of poststructuralism and psychological analysis. He supports an interpretative critical approach in contrast to structuralist and poststructuralist criticism. He puts faith on the master code of Marxism. He notes that:

All class consciousness...including ruling class consciousness...is in its very nature utopian and adds that “the index of all class consciousness is to be found in the dawning sense of solidarity with other members of a particular group. (Jameson 290)

Jameson argues that the discourse of one social exerts ideological control or hegemony over other discourses through the process of struggle. There is a consistent history of the struggle of art and in society some classes exert the ideological control and this adversely affect the approach of the artists. Jameson suggests that while the hegemonic process operates, the control is never effortless of total. Some people always resist it and the hegemonic situation is never static. It is this struggle that keeps the totality in flux as Jameson says: “One complex of social relations fades away, along with its hegemonic networks, while another comes into being” (57). Forms produce meaning as he says: “the production of aesthetic narrative form is to be seen as an ideological act” (79). The study of history or the sequence of the modes of production of meaning is to study the changes in the ideology of form. The ideology of freedom promotes the belief that all are entitled to enjoy freedom. All have the inalienable right to enjoy freedom from a prince down to a pauper. But the freedom concept is deceptive as the dominating classes crush the liberty of others as they have the structure of power. The complexity of the modes of production creates the complexity in the text. Jameson is answering the poststructuralists who do not give room for the distinction between text and reality by treating reality itself as mere text. The pattern of symbols in a text performs very positive role in interpreting the social reality. Jameson has critically analyzed the role of symbols investigating the views of Northrop Frye. The writer is inspired and he often seeks inspiration from the old myths and cultural traditions and rituals. This process leads to the formation of symbolical pattern in a text. Jameson’s patterns regarding the “aesthetic” and “symbolic” acts invite comparison with Adorno’s arguments on similar lines. Adorno uses the notion of the “inherent functionality” to denote all the elements and forces operating within a work of art at different levels. Adorno says that every work of art represents the social reality aiming to be identical with the ideal reality.

Jameson shares the same ideas with Adorno. His concept of how the aesthetic act becomes a “symbolic act” corresponds with what Adorno says about the process of art’s taking shape. Adorno argues that a work of art adopts a definite relation with reality by stepping out of reality. Jameson borrows many ideas from Adorno describing the relation between art and reality. It is through this relationship that a work of art “salvages” within it what was once a concrete reality to community. Thus the tension in art has relations with the tensions in the community. Adorno says: “The fundamental layers of artistic experience are akin to the objective word from which art recoils” (Adorno 8). Jameson argues that there are always elements which resist integration in a society. A writer should consider the elements of disintegration; he should identify them and retell them in the text.

The job of a writer is to unearth the repressed history in order to fit the symbolic act into the great plot of human history. The role of political interpretation cannot be underestimated. A work of art has to explore the traces of the repressed history which look fractured and the art struggles to integrate to achieve collective reality. Jameson argues that “the cultural artifact is, then, reconstructed and rewritten by assimilating the fractured and the repressed” (20). The political interpretation of the text helps to uncover the unconscious dimension of the text. Often the text when it is read say something quite different from what it appears to be saying. As shifts and breaks of various kinds in the text are evidences of what is repressed in silence of the text. It is the duty of the critic to find out the inner contradictions of the text, to explore the underlying disunity of the text beneath an apparent unity. Jameson argues that any aesthetic work is a socially symbolic act. For example, drama is a socially symbolic act as it is part of the “vast unfinished plot of human life.” Its causality is this life, and the

repression of ideology makes it repressed history. It is not an isolated artifact, but an imitation of life. Art can create an illusion that it is an independent artifact but it cannot escape the fractures in it, which are caused by the contradictions of life. A.N. Jeffares says: "Drama is a communal act, the representation of crucial actions by living people on a stage in front of an audience" (Jeffares 3). These words bring out the basic function of art in the society; it is a communal act. Jameson has mentioned three horizons in *The Political Unconscious* and each horizon produces a semantic enrichment of the literary work which is the main objective of Jameson.

To conclude, Jameson has given his own transcendent view of history, it is limited to events, different phases in struggles and the rise and fall of political regimes, social fashions, customs, struggles between historical individuals and he perceived crisis. In this part of his book, Jameson discusses the reading of myths of Claude-Levi-Strauss. He has written an essay: "The Structural Study of Myth in which he has discussed the basic principle of myth-making. Jameson argues that the dominant class ideology will invent strategies to dominate the subjected class and also compel them to follow the ideology, social and classes are caused by the material necessity; by the modes of production and relations of production. The social relations among men are bound up with the way they produce their material life. As the modes of production and relations of production change, social relations and classes also change. The dominant class tries to retain the power in society but the lower class people struggle to organize a revolution against them. In the texts the plight of the workers is depicted by the writers and highlight through symbols their silence and marginalization. The purpose of the texts is to reconstruct the popular cultures from the fragments of folk tales, folk songs and create a collective culture.

Jameson observes that the "sign system of several distinct modes of production can be registered and apprehended" (98). The ideology of form assumes significance as all the contradictions are hidden in the form of the text. All the specific messages are emitted by the varied sign system by the text. Form is very important in the text as it informs content, and is in turn informed by content. Jameson discusses the various forms of ideology; its structure; alienation and reification. Jameson argues that "history is the ultimate ground as well as the untranscendable limit of our understanding in general, and our understanding in general, and our textual interpretations in particular" (100). The bourgeoisie class maintains control over all aspects of society including art and literature. "It is this struggle that keeps the totality in flux so that one complex of social relations fades away, along with its hegemonic networks, while another comes into being" (57). Jameson suggests there is a continuous struggle going on between the proletariats and bourgeoisie. The main thrust of the bourgeoisie is to control the production of meaning. Meaning is produced through forms as Jameson says: "the production of aesthetic narrative form is to be seen as an ideological act" (79).

Jameson has evolved a new theory of interpretation of the texts. He rejects the conventional way of interpretation and reviews the cultural interpretative tradition. Marxism is significant because for Marx history is a single collective narrative linking past with the present. Jameson defends Marxian approach of history and the significance of the historical process in understanding the growth of culture and the meaning of the means of production. Jameson uses a range of theories including structuralism, deconstruction, archetypal criticism, allegorical interpretations and much more for critical interpretation of a literary text. Jameson argues that a work of art is "disguised and symbolic" in theme and form. It has a fundamental theme which is part of the history of mankind and struggles between different groups. Thus literary works are "cardinal episodes in a single unfinished plot" (20). Fredric Jameson discusses his modern theory analyzing the works of many modern and postmodern writers such as Balzac, Conrad, James Joyce, D. H Lawrence and Bakhtin. He maintains that on the initial level, "the individual work is grasped essentially as a symbolic act" In the concluding part of his book *Marxism and Form*, Jameson claims that a text is a praxis (practice different from theory) but in his *The Political Unconscious*, he claims that a text has symbolic action to convey. He discusses the concept of "symbolic act" in detail in his Balzac section. Jameson explores the novels of Balzac to clarify the concept of "symbolic act." He opines that often the plots of the novels of Balzac are read through the lens of the model of myth of Levi Strauss. We can explore the hidden meaning of the novels of Balzac with the help of "semiotic square" of A. J. Greimas, as an allegory of "the imaginary resolution of a real contradiction" The novels of Balzac are relevant today because of his deep interest in the historical forces. Balzac is a French novelist who opened the gates of realism in European literature and his fiction greatly impacted Emile Zola, Charles Dickens, Gustave Flaubert and Henry James.

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