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Marxist – Feminist approach to Maxim Gorky’s “Mother”

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Abstract

Maxim Gorky wrote his novel “Mother” as an influential piece of propaganda during the stirring times in Russia. The novel is basically about the revolutionary spirit of a lady Nilovana who takes the responsibility of the worker’s revolution started by her son Pavel, when her son gets imprisoned due to his involvement in the workers revolution. In a way she becomes mother of all the revolutionaries taking up the responsibility to complete his son’s undone task. This novel presents a heart rendering picture of the miserable life of the workers who get no proper reward for the work they do. They live a mechanical from Monday to Saturday and on the weekend they indulge in drinking and violence, either outside home or within the families, the major victims being their wives. That’s why this novel has a Marxist – Feminist approach as it depicts the problems of the working class in a capitalist society and their revolutionary fervour in order to gain their rights from the view point of a female.

Keywords: Mother, revolution, workers, capitalist, feminist, rights, society

Introduction

Alexei Maximovich Peskov, popularly known as Maxim Gorky was a Russian- Soviet writer, was a founder of the socialist-literary method and a political activist. He got nominated five times for the prestigious Nobel Prize. He directly opposed the Tsarist regime and for a longer period of time kept associated with Vladimir Lenin and Alexander Bogdanov’s Bolshevik Wing of the party. But latterly Gorky got separated from him. For a significant part of his life, he was exiled from Russia and later the Soviet Union.

Marxism and Feminism are generally known to be different and separate theories. The Marxist approach on the one hand emphasizes that social life is based on “conflicts of interest” i.e. the conflict between the Bourgeoisie and the Proletariat. Thus, in a way, Marxism works towards the achievement of a classless society, the abolition of private property and the prevention of exploitation of working class. The Feminist approach whereas emphasizes that life is based on “conflicts of gender”. Feminism basically focuses on the establishment of and defending equal political, economic and social rights and providing equal opportunities to women. Therefore the goal of feminists is to overcome the women’s exploitation, oppression, gender- biases and to overthrow the patriarchal system.

What is Marxist – Feminist Approach

The Marxist – Feminist approach together aims at the eradication of the industrial society as a way to emancipate women. The Marxist –Feminist ideology had its birth in the book of Engels ‘‘ The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State’’. In this book he tried to explain that the main reason behind women’s inferiority is not biology but the society. The Marxist – Feminists believe that the only way to end women’s exploitation is to abolish the capitalist society. Women can only be truly free, truly equal with men if they get an opportunity to stand equally with men on socialist grounds. Therefore the true strength of this theory is the liberation of men and women from the bondage of inhuman capitalist society.

Gorky uses the view point of Palagea Nilovna to show the state of things before the Revolution of 1917. Her view point is considered very important, if not most important, as it helps us understand the novel clearly and completely. Other factors related to Nilovna such as her occupation, psyche, past and even her role in the revolutionary movement are of equal significance.

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In the beginning of the novel, Nilovna is a naïve woman. Michael Vlasov, her husband, was a pessimist who earned little and every holiday he used to beat somebody because of which everyone disliked him. But in his job, he was an honest and hard working fellow who never flattered the supervisor, thus earning very little. Pavel, Vlasov's son, hated his father to the core. He was only seventeen when Vlasov died. The story of the novel, in fact, starts when Vlasov died and the whole responsibility falls on Pavel's shoulders, the new head of the family. Nilovna was an exploited female proletariat who had no work, therefore, Pavel had to make a living to feed her mother as well as himself. Much to the stress of Nilovna, Pavel started exhibiting a different set of habits and behavior. Nilovna felt herself to be an unfortunate mother when her son came home drunk just two weeks after the death of his father. Like his father, Pavel shouted at her mother for food. He asked his mother for his father's pipe too so that he can smoke. Pavel had behaved like this, in front of her mother, for the first time and she meekly says:

“What sort of bread giver you will be if you begin to drink?”

He answers: “Everybody drinks.”

She remarks “But don't you drink. Your father drank, he made enough misery for me. Take pity on your mother, then, will you not?”

Nilovna was not very harsh or strict at his son's attitude as she knew that the workers don't have any other place for recreation except the tavern. The helpless mother began to pray in silence kneeling before the sacred image upon the wall. Finally, a mother's passionate prayers are listened to and proved fruitful. Gradually Pavel started avoiding the beaten path trodden by all. He avoided going to parties and came home dignified even on holidays. Pavel started reading some books and usually copied one or the other thing on a piece of paper. Nilovna always remained curious about her son's books. When Nilovna asked, he replied:

“I am reading forbidden books. They are forbidden to be read because they tell the truth about our- about workingmen's life.”

Along with her son Nilovna also started to change. Her role in the society began to change, she being totally unaware. Although in the beginning she resisted this ideology but due to the love of her son, she began to change and embraced that ideology herself. She treated other revolutionaries like her own children and assumed the role of a mother to all. Pavel's very close friend Khokhol used to believe that although Pavel is a good orator yet his speech sometimes lacks the heart of the socialist movement which the mother seems to have.

The way a change comes into the character of Nilovna and the way she develops, implies that the women should take up their roles in society to struggle for their belief. Through her character Gorky has shown that the contribution of women is also important in such revolutions. Nilovna becomes completely involved in the revolution when her son Pavel gets arrested. Marya becomes her assistant in that task. She began to carry leaflets, to the factory, for the workers concealed with the dinner. All this proved to the authorities that instead of Pavel there is somebody else who

is distributing the pamphlets among the workers. While distributing the pamphlets Nilovna also developed a greater understanding of the ideology, her son was fighting for Nilovna became an activist on the first of May when Pavel again gets arrested because of waving the workers flag and shouting:

“Long live the workers.”

As soon as Pavel gets arrested, the mother took all the responsibility and sang the song of revolution:

“Our march is to join our suffering comrades.”

Nilovna requested the people to open up their hearts and to come forward in support of their children who are devoted to a sacred cause and that too selflessly. In order to participate in the movement Nilovna left her own village and went to the city with Sofya to distribute the newspapers. Many a times in the month Nilovna, sometimes dressed as a nun, sometimes as a lace hawker, or a rich merchant's wife or a religious pilgrim, rode here and there from one village to another in order to distribute the forbidden literature and awaken the workers. Furthermore Nilovna also tried to get Pavel's speech published, which he made in the court, which was quiet moving and enthralling.

Then comes the climax of the novel when novel is attacked by a spy, on the railway station, when she is going to distribute the pamphlets having Pavel's speech. The policeman then arrested Nilovna and took her away to the prison, beating her badly. But they couldn't crush her spirit. This situation is, therefore symbolic as well as socialist-realist. Except Nilovna there are many other female characters in the novel who participate in that revolution like Natasha, Sasha, Ludmilla and Sofya. Although Natasha and Sasha belonged to the upper class yet from heart they were proletariats and their heart belonged to the socialist movement. In a way this also shows that for the success of a revolution, participation of people from all the sections of society is necessary. The impact is stronger when the bourgeoisie come forward, surrendering their property to favour the proletariat.

Therefore, with the help of the characters who have left their mansions and plantations to contribute in the movement indicate Gorky's belief in the Marxist – Feminist theory. Ideally the ideology Nilovna was fighting for was good. It was the writers attempt to explain socialism and what the revolutionists were fighting for. Therefore the novel proves to be an aesthetically written work which is a perfect example of Marxist- Feminist approach.

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