

A Marxist Reading of *'The Madwoman of Chaillot'*

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Abstract

Having read the play, it could be understood that ideology and capitalistic attitude which is a recent phenomenon has been spread throughout the world and people have a materialistic view towards and commodify each other. The use and exchange values are replaced by sign exchange value and commodity and goods are changing into master and humanity becomes their slave. Hence commodity fetishism is the new aspect of economic relations. Moreover by means of anarchy and chaos and also unawareness of lower class or proletariats, capitalists can get what they want. However the Marxist theory and reading of the play reveals that finally the proletariats of a society come to consciousness of their being abused by capitalism and revolt against them and live a free life ever after as Marx had predicted it in nineteenth century. In spite of his prediction, this fantasy never comes true in reality and it remains as a fairy tale and that is why this work is categorized in genre of fantasy. Nonetheless analysis of this play from different perspective can show how it is possible.

Key words: ideology; capitalism; commodity; fetishism; classism.

1. Introduction

This paper examines capitalism and the key terms that were provided by Marx and other Marxist thinkers. different theories in politics and economics and also rise of communism are going to be analyzed and applied in this play and how revolution of proletariats being shaped is going to be shown.

2. About the Play

The Madwoman of Chaillot written by Giraudoux is a poetic fantasy that most of its events cannot happen in reality. However the idea and the content aren't imaginary and have roots in Marx's theory in which awareness and coming to sense of lower class can save them forever.

3. Karl Marx

"Karl Heinrich Marx (1818–1883), was a German political, economic, and philosophical theorist and revolutionist. The influence of Marx's ideas on modern world history has been vast." (Habib : 527). "Marx attempted systematically to seek the structural causes behind what he

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saw as a system of capitalist exploitation and degradation, and to offer solutions in the spheres of economics and politics. As with all socialists, Marx's main objection to capitalism was that one particular class owned the means of economic production." (Habib : 528). "The bourgeoisie. . . has centralized means of production, and has concentrated property in a few hands." (Ctd. in Habib : 528).

4. Ideology

The ideology and domination of bourgeois' thinking in a given society play the most important role in shaping demands for goods. This demand that most of the time is false has no external purpose but to feed capitalism. "The market economy produces a systematically false consciousness: an ideology". (Hawkes : 1) It is in this place that all material and spiritual needs are met and brings gratification to human as Thomas Frank remarks in *one market under God*:

Only when people act within the marketplace, such thinkers told us, do they act rationally, choose rightly, and make their wishes known transparently. Only then could business give us what we wanted, cater to our freely expressed choices. Markets are where we are most fully human; markets are where we show that we have a soul. To protest against markets is to surrender one's very personhood, to put oneself outside the family of mankind. (Ctd. in Hawkes : 2).

Such an attitude can be seen in this play, "The rag picker :.....in a desperate effort to get rid of this money, I began to buy things. I bought the Northern Refinerie...that is how I bought my twelve chateaux, my twenty villas,...." (The madwoman of Chaillot : 18-19). In this scene that rag picker imaginatively regards himself as a rich person, his identity is being shaped by what he has bought and the market satisfies him.

Also ideology which refers to truth in society is determined by the dominant group and what they say is the absolute criteria and must be followed as a norm. Although the form of this ideology may not be imperative and compulsory, the way it is applied in society makes people follow it.

Ideology meant (for the ideologues themselves) a philosophical hygiene revealing truth, and (for Marx) the very falsity which needed to be cleansed. The problem of apparent contradiction disappears, however, when one realizes that the falsity of those false ideas is guaranteed by the truth of one's own ideas. Ideology refers, as it were, to the negative and positive poles of a dogmatic conviction. (Minogue : 98).

In this play, it can be seen that the president claims indirectly that he has control over others' life and what he says should be done.

The president : Baron, although I am your chairman, I have no authority over your personal life – none that is except to fix the amount of your director's fees and eventually to assign a motor car for your use. Therefore, I am asking you, as a personal favor to me, not to purchase anything from this fellow. (Madwoman of Chaillot: 3).

5. Commodity Fetishism.

The concept of money has changed completely. Money has no value by itself rather it shows the value of the sold goods and services which is referred as use value, "a commodity's value lies not in what it can do (*use value*)" (Tyson : 62), however in current thinking and in Marxist theory the value of goods is regarded in terms of for which it can

be traded, “in the money or other commodities for which it can be traded (*exchange value*)” (Tyson : 62) or the social status which is given to the owner, “in the social status it confers on its owner (*sign-exchange value*).” (Tyson : 62). Hence when a produced product or service has these two values in a society’s ideology, it can be regarded as a commodity, “An object becomes a commodity only when it has exchange value or sign-exchange value, and both forms of value are determined by the society in which the object is exchanged.” (Tyson : 62).

As it was mentioned before, money itself has become an end and an object that is loved for its own sake as Baudrillard quotes in *ideology*, “Money is calcified representation, and It is ‘the total artificiality of the sign that one adores in money’” (Ctd. In Hawkes : 168). The concept of money and what it stands for manipulates subjects’ ”It is the money-form, the principle of abstract equivalence, which exemplifies, and even embodies, objectified representation. The unprecedented dominance of finance capital thus extends representation into material practice, and also into the minds of human subjects.” (Hawkes : 168). Hence this ideology which is dominant throughout life creates commodity fetishism and fills peoples with it and even changes life into an ideology and deteriorate human psyche and our consciousness becomes an illusion as to paraphrase Zizek supports this claim:

This effect of commodity fetishism on the individual psyche is Zizek’s primary concern. Due to the fact that he views this effect as malign and distorting, Zizek revives the concept of ideology in order to describe it. He does not, however, return to the notion that ideology consists purely of ideas....he assumes that real life becomes ideological...The problem is with material reality itself, which has taken the grotesque shape of an objectified illusion, and this illusion is duplicated in our consciousness.(Hawkes : 168).

Therefore, this illusion becomes part of our own ego which always possesses us and it can be the reason for most of our economic activities. we know money is nothing but an illusion however people go on adoring money as if it were master or has a magical power and makes humanity its own slave; it can give everything e.g. happiness, trust, women and not having money equals not having any identity at all or in the other words people worship money as God. All the social relations can be explained in terms of economic relations and money becomes the fetish for people as Hawkes quotes from Zizek it in this way:

When individuals use money, they know very well that there is nothing magical about it – that money, in its materiality, is simply an expression of social relations. The everyday spontaneous ideology reduces money to a simple sign giving the individual possessing it a right to a certain part of the social product. So, on an everyday level, the individuals know very well that there are relations between people behind the relations between things. The problem is that in their social activity itself, in what they are doing, they are acting as if money, in its material reality, is the embodiment of wealth as such. They are fetishists in practice, not in theory. (169)

What have been said can be observed in this play. Some examples will show it clearly. “Constance : Because they worship money. Because money is king...Countess : Because we live in the reign of Golden Calf...Men now publicly worship the Golden Calf...Nowadays only money talks to bishop....Objects talk...” (The Madwoman of Chailiot : 18). This instances from the play which one of them has religious allegory shows the position of money among people which is like God, the lie and the illusion we are living and becomes real for people, “Zizek sees the materialization of ideology as an unmitigated catastrophe. It means, he thinks, that we are literally living a lie. Because we live it, however, the lie

becomes real.” (Hawkes : 171), and the power of money and also humanization of objects which can talk. “The Ragkeeper : when you have no money, nobody trusts you, nobody believes you, nobody likes you....and without it is to be ugly, boring, stupid and useless.” (The Madwoman of Chailiot : 15). Again this shows the magical power of money. What have been said above shows different perspectives of commodity fetishism.

6. Classism and Capitalism

As the name shows, class means different divisions with different people or it connotes inequality, “Marx located the source of this conflict in the fact that one class owned the means of production, while the other class owned nothing but their labour power, which they were obliged to sell in order to survive.” (Day : 6). By this classification two groups are shaped in which one of the them – proletariat–get paid in lowest possible amount and the other – bourgeois – owns everything.

Marx called the class who owned the means of production the bourgeoisie and the class who sold their labour power the proletariat. According to Marx, the interests of these two classes were fundamentally opposed since the bourgeoisie, in order to make a profit, paid the workers the lowest possible wage while demanding that they attain the highest level of productivity. (Day : 7).

In his view, the opposition between these two classes was always matter of history and source of change. “Furthermore, he believed that class struggle was the motive force of history. The antagonism between the classes, based on their different relations to production, makes them conscious of themselves as classes and this leads to conflict and therefore change.” (Day : 7). This accumulation of wealth by one group which consists of minorities makes capitalism in society and gives the ultimate power to whom it is held by. *In Tarrying with the Negative*, Zizek claims:

Marxist insight that Capital is the ultimate power of ‘deterritorialization’ which undermines every fixed social identity, and to conceive of ‘late capitalism’ as the epoch in which the traditional fixity of ideological positions (patriarchal authority, fixed sexual roles, etc.) becomes an obstacle to the unbridled commodification of everyday life. (216)

In this play, it can be seen that whoever has the money has other institution under their control, “The Ragekeeper : I am the law. When I speak it is the law.” (The Madwoman of Chailiot : 15). The proletariats of society are unaware of their own abuse and it is as if they gave money and power to capitalism willingly. One example from this play explains it. “Little Man : Here – take it – please, take it!...it is my life’s savings. Every cent. I put all in your hands.” (The Madwoman of Chailiot : 4), what has been said is shown through this example and capitalist says, “The President : people like us don’t give receipts for money. We take them.”(The Madwoman of Chailiot : 4) and it shows capitalism deserves itself to have all the money. Hence this an illusion that dominates society and has roots in unawareness of people. *In The Sublime Object of Ideology* Zizek claims:

ideology is not simply a false consciousness, an illusory representation of reality, it is rather this reality itself which is already to be conceived as ideological – ideological is a social reality whose very existence implies the non-knowledge of its participants as to its essence. . . . Ideological is not the false consciousness of a social being but this being in so far as it is supported by false consciousness. (21).

According to Marx’s prediction, the time comes when proletarians came to their consciousness and revolt against capitalism and dominant bourgeois’ thinking and establish

another system in which there is no difference and inequality among people and all of them treated the same way. “Few Marxists today believe, as Marx did, that the proletariat will one day spontaneously develop the class consciousness needed to rise up in violent revolution against their oppressors and create a classless society.” (Tyson : 54). In this play Marx’s prediction comes true and Countess who is type character of Proletarians and lives in a dream becomes aware of the situation and she awakes the other proletarians. “The Ragkeeper : because you live in a dream, Countess...” (The madwoman of Chaillot : 12). “Pierre : How can we get rid of them? They are too strong.” (The Madwoman of Chaillot : 13). This example shows that the proletarian revolution is being shaped and people are getting conscious of their being exploited. “Countess :.....Today we must make a decision which may alter the fate of the world.” (The Madwoman of Chaillot : 13). They are planning to change the world by creating a just system that treats people the same way and that is rise of communism. In this system people are equal and are free and they are not manipulated by capitalism or any other government. “Karl Marx sincerely believed that under communism – the future society of his imagination which he saw as an inevitable, and ultimate, stage of human development – people would live more freely than ever before.” (Brown : 9). Having succeeded in revolting and approaching to their desirable system, the characters are hopeful and optimistic about the future of humanity and they can live a free life ever after. “.....People reacted to it [communism] in different ways – as a source of hope for a radiant future..” (Brown : 10). As in the play it is said, “Pierre : The air is pure! The sky is clear!” “Irma: Life is beautiful again.” “The Ragkeeper :...the pigeons are flying!” (Madwoman of Chaillot: 23). Hence these statements shows what a beautiful future awaits humanity!

7. Capitalism and Anarchism

As it was mentioned before, capitalism identify vulnerable divisions and get what they want through influence, threat, bribery and even chaos and exploit poor people by keeping authority over them.

Capitalism roams the globe, seeking the least protected labour market and the least protected physical environment, in order to stimulate, and to win, an ever-growing market for its goods. It describes this process as consumer sovereignty and thus evades any responsibility for its ruthless exploitation of poor people and weak economies. (Ward : 90).

In this play, it can be seen that, capitalists want to extract oil and in order to reach their goals they have to make a war and use bomb to make chaos. “Prospector : Paris is the least prospected place in the world.....But has anyone ever thought of looking for oil in Paris?.....Do you know what a bomb is?...I have tried everything with him – influence, bribes, threats.”(The Madwoman of Chaillot : 5-7). Moreover they use a poor person whose weakness they know as a means to get their end. “Pierre : I forgot a signature..He promised to tear it up, if I did what he wanted...” (The Madwoman of Chaillot :11).

8. Conclusion

So far, the Marxist theory and some terminologies invented by him have been examined. Also insights of Zizek have been applied to this play. The ideology of capitalism and the ways by which it survives have been challenged and it has been founded that unawareness or illusionary and false consciousness is the most important reason that people are living under the ideology of capitalism and unless proletarians want to change the system and revolt, they have to deal with it.

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