

Reading Katherine Mansfield's 'A Cup of Tea' in the light of Marxist Criticism

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Abstract: According to Karl Marx, literature is the reflections of a writer who is the product of the society. The socio, political, economic influences on the writer determines his consciousness. Hence the social, historical, political, economic and cultural conditions behind the text need to be considered in Marxist approach. Thus reading of the text through the lens of Marxist critic provides the reader context based understanding of the literary text. This essay will endeavour to explore Katherine Mansfield's short story 'A Cup of Tea' in the light of Marx Criticism to comprehend the attitude of bourgeois or upper class, their self-indulgence and callousness towards the oppressed class.

Key Words: Marxism, bourgeois, proletariat, class consciousness.

This essay will endeavour to explore Katherine Mansfield's short story 'A Cup of Tea' in the light of Marx Criticism to comprehend the attitude of bourgeois or upper class, their self-indulgence and callousness towards the oppressed class or proletariat. Marxist critical analysis of any text needs to review the following social forces in the novel:

- The financial position of the characters.
- The prevailing social order.
- Do characters recognize the oppressiveness of the prevailing social order?
- How do the characters respond to the social order?
- What affects their options for changing things?
- How is social objectification evident and how does it operate in the text.
- The relation between capital and labour, Bourgeoisie (Have): Those who won and control the means of production in society and Proletariat (Have not).

'A Cup of Tea' written in 1922 by Katherine Mansfield provides glimpses of autobiographical influences, class consciousness, love of materialism, freedom enjoyed by the wealthy and the helplessness of the oppressed. The story opens with an introductory description of Rosmary Fell, the typical bourgeois illustrative:

"She was young, brilliant, extremely modern, exquisitely well dressed, amazingly well read in the newest of the new books, and her parties were the most delicious mixture of the really important people and... artists – quaint creatures, discoveries of hers, some of them too terrifying for words, but others quite presentable and amusing."(1)

"They were rich, really rich, not just comfortably well off" not only highlights how wealthy Rosemary and Philip were but also how self-indulgent was Rosemary. "She was amazingly well read in the newest of the new book" is a sarcastic comment to expose the bourgeoisie attitude of 'have all' and 'know all'. Rosemary from her appearance and attitude stands apart from the normal.

The freedom that Rosemary enjoys is expressed in the lines: "But if Rosemary wanted to shop she would go to Paris as you and I would go to Bond Street". If she wanted to buy flowers, "the car pulled up at that perfect shop in Regent Street", and Rosemary inside the shop just gazed in her dazzled, rather exotic way, and said: "I want

those and those and those. Give me four bunches of those. And that jar of roses. Yes, I'll have all the roses in the jar. No, no lilac. I hate lilac. It's got no shape."

Rosmary goes for shopping in the 'car', which highlights the 'class difference' between Rosemary and those around her. During 1920s, the period when this story was written only the wealthy could afford a car. The reader is introduced to the protagonist when she goes out for shopping to spend her day at some west corners of London in the finest of shops. The dominating and materialistic attitude of the upper class is well projected on the canvass of the story. Though not needed, Rosmary goes to purchase flowers in her car to a shop in Regent Street:

"Rosemary inside the shop just gazed in her dazzled, rather exotic way, and said: "I want those and those and those. Give me four bunches of those. And that jar of roses. Yes, I'll have all the roses in the jar. No, no lilac. I hate lilac. It's got no shape." The attendant bowed and put the lilac out of sight, as though this was only too true; lilac was dreadfully shapeless. And she was followed to the car by a thin shop-girl staggering under an immense white paper..."

Rosmary can afford to get precisely what she wants due to her wealthy rank, and hence she is too demanding and tough with people who are below her status. The shopkeeper and the girl who carries the flowers to her car are overwhelmingly obedient due to their poor rank. The 'bourgeois' ill treatment towards the 'proletariat' is evident.

One winter afternoon she had been buying something in a little antique shop in Curzon Street. It was a shop she liked. For one thing, one usually had it to oneself. And then the man who kept it was ridiculously fond of serving her. He beamed whenever she came in. He clasped his hands; he was so gratified he could scarcely speak. Flattery, of course. All the same, there was something... "You see, madam," he would explain in his low respectful tones, "I love my

things. I would rather not part with them than sell them to someone who does not appreciate them, who has not that fine feeling which is so rare..." And, breathing deeply, he unrolled a tiny square of blue velvet and pressed it on the glass counter with his pale finger-tips. To-day it was a little box. He had been keeping it for her. He had shown it to nobody as yet. An exquisite little enamel box with a glaze so fine it looked as though it had been baked in cream. On the lid a minute creature stood under a flowery tree, and a more minute creature still had her arms round his neck. Her hat, really no bigger than a geranium petal, hung from a branch; it had green ribbons. And there was a pink cloud like a watchful cherub floating above their heads.

"Rosemary took her hands out of her long gloves. She always took off her gloves to examine such things. Yes, she liked it very much. She loved it; it was a great duck. "

She wanted to have it. While seeing the box, she admires her own fingers. Self-glorification is often seen as a characteristic feature of Rosmary. Her wish to buy the velvet box shows her love for materials.

The climax of the story sees a change of attitude in Rosmary. While getting to her car Rosmary is startled by a girl. This girl is wearing ragged clothes and asks her money for a cup of tea. Rosemary finds this an opportunity of adventure and experience as narrated often in the novels of Dostoevsky. She wanted to show how rich people are merciful. Asking the poor girl to come home for a cup of tea was not out of compassion or an impulse. It shows the hypocrisy prevalent among the rich class. Rosmary wants to imitate the character in Dostoevsky's novel and believes that "it would be thrilling" and she can boast about her charity in front of her friends. The upper class attitude of using the labour class according to their whims and fancies is evident through Rosmary's ways of treating Miss Smith.

On arriving home Rosmary takes Miss Smith to her bedroom. The wonderful "lacquer furniture, gold cushions" all these things astounded the poor starving girl. Rosemary was very relaxed and pleased on her charitable act. She lit a cigarette and relaxed gazing at the girl without making any attempt of taking proper care of Miss Smith. The reader is given to know that Rosmary doesn't even know the girl's name as she considered it to be of little

value. Unable to bare hunger, the girl cries saying “I am going to faint ... madam”. The gap between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat is accentuated through this scene. Rosmary is unable to empathize with the poor. It was a terrible fascinating moment for her. A girl crying due to hunger was extraordinary, unimaginable. Rosemary knelt beside her chair. The girl becomes completely restless: “I can’t bear it. I shall do away with myself”. Rosemary is really touched beyond words but suddenly asks her to stop crying as it was so “exhausting”. As poverty cannot be imagined, Rosmary is unable to face the reality. Engrossed in their affluent life style, during 1920’s the upper class were insensitive towards labour class problems.

Rosmary’s husband Philips disapproves her idea of keeping Miss Smith at home. When Philips finds Rosmary reluctant to give up her fanciful thought, Philips points out that Miss Smith is remarkably pretty. Rosmary pushed by her insecurities, gives some cash to the poor girl making her leave the house. Class disparity is evident here. Philips cannot tolerate Rosmary’s association with lower class person. By ending the story with Rosemary asking Philip for the money to buy the little box and Rosemary asking Philip ‘am I pretty?’ , Mansfield throws light on the bourgeois love for materialism and the insecure feeling in spite of being wealthy.

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