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MARXIST CRITICISM, THE FRANKFURT SCHOOL AND WALTER BENJAMIN

MARKSİST ELEŞTİRİ, FRANKFURT OKULU VE WALTER BENJAMİN

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Abstract

Marxist literary criticism has been developed on the basis of Marxist political ideas. Even though Marx makes important statements about culture and society in the 1850s Marxist criticism is a phenomenon that came into being in the twentieth century. According to Marx, the ideology, politics, and art which make up the superstructure of a society are all determined by the economic structure of that society. Karl Marx discusses the basic concepts of communism in his work "The Communist Manifesto" and asserts that societies and their economic systems are constantly in a process of evolution to create a classless society. The point in Marxist criticism is that literature cannot be separated or isolated from the ideological and the economic realities of the society in which this literature is produced. On the other hand, the Frankfurt School, which is practically a neo-Marxist one, is a critique of the enlightenment tradition. The radical change and the difference of critique between the two schools lie on the intellectual basis. As an Institute for Social Research originally, the Frankfurt School developed a neo-Marxist social theory. The members of the Frankfurt School borrowed from the theorists of the late-nineteenth century. Its members were basically pluralists. Walter Benjamin is an important member of the Frankfurt School. He was also under the influence of Marxism and showed an inclination to Marxist School, too. Benjamin mixes social criticism and linguistic analysis with historical nostalgia. The fundamental aesthetic differentiation for him is the one between creation and formation. According to Benjamin, criticism is the presentation of truth of a work of art. Criticism tries to culminate, complete and systematize what the work of art began.

Keywords: Marxism, the Frankfurt School, Theory, Walter Benjamin, Criticism

Öz

Marxist edebiyat eleştirisi Marxist politik düşünceler üzerine geliştirilmiştir. Marksist eleştiri, 1850'lerde Marx'ın, kültür ve toplum hakkında önemli açıklamalarda

bulunmasına rağmen, 20. yüzyılda ortaya çıkmış bir olgudur. Marx'a göre, ideoloji, politika ve sanat gibi bir toplumun üst yapısını oluşturan öğeler o toplumun ekonomik yapısı tarafından belirlenir. Karl Marx "Komünist Manifesto" adlı eserinde komünizmin temel kavramlarını tartışır ve toplumların ve ekonomik sistemlerinin sınıfsız bir toplum yaratmak için sürekli bir evrim sürecinde olduğunu iddia eder. Marksist eleştiride önemli olan husus, edebiyatın, bu edebiyatın üretildiği toplumun ideolojik ve ekonomik gerçeklerinden ayrı tutulamayacağı ya da izole edilemeyeceği yönündedir. Diğer taraftan, pratikte bir neo-Marxist olan Frankfurt Okulu, aydınlanma geleneğinin bir eleştirisidir. Radikal değişim ve iki okul arasındaki eleştiri farkı entelektüel temeldedir. Aslında bir toplumsal araştırma kurumu olan Frankfurt Okulu yeni bir neo-Marxist teori geliştirmiştir. Frankfurt Okulu üyeleri on dokuzuncu yüzyılın son teorisyenlerinden yararlanmışlardır. Üyeleri temel olarak çoğulculardır. Walter Benjamin Frankfurt Okulunun önemli bir üyesidir. O da Marxizmin etkisi altındaydı ve Marxist Okuluna bir eğilim göstermişti. Benjamin sosyal eleştiriyle dilbilim analizini tarihsel nostaljiyle birlikte işler. Benjamin, sosyal eleştiri ve dilsel analiz ile tarihi nostaljiyi harmanlar. Benjamin için temel estetik farklılaşma, yaratılış ve oluşum arasındaki temel farklılıktır. Benjamin'e göre eleştiri bir sanat eserinin gerçeğinin sunumudur. Eleştiri bir eserin başladığı şeyi neticeye ulaştırmaya, tamamlamaya ve sistematize etmeye çalışır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Marxism, Frankfurt Okulu, Teori, Walter Benjamin, Eleştiri

Marxist literary criticism takes its main concepts and ideas from the nineteenth century realism and formulates them into quite another approach which gets systematized in the twentieth century. The philosophy that Marxist literary criticism uses in its discussions is related to Hegel's dialectical idealism. Hegel's dialectical idealism is modified by the Marxist critics and changed into a kind of economic determinism. According to Hegel, the whole existence is in a dynamic process of evolution whose aim is eventually to reach perfection. Karl Marx discusses the basic concepts of communism in his work "*The Communist Manifesto*" and asserts that societies and their economic systems are constantly in a process of evolution to create a classless society. In making such a statement Marx uses Hegel's dialectical idealism and bases his economic determinism on its main concepts.

Hegel claims that "the history of culture is in a dynamic process of evolution which is composed of different states of being, and each state of being is a synthesis made up of a thesis and antithesis" (Caudwell, 1988: 87). Marx substitutes the dialectical strife between the bourgeois and the workers for He-

gel's dialectical strife between the thesis and the antithesis in cultural evolution. Even though Marx makes important statements about culture and society in the 1850s Marxist criticism is a phenomenon that came into being in the twentieth century. One of Marx's statements provides a point of departure in studying Marxist literary theory and criticism. He says; "It is not the consciousness of men that determines their being, but, on the contrary, their social being that determines their consciousness" (qtd in Selden & Widdowson, 1993: 70).

Marxist literary criticism has been developed on the basis of Marxist political ideas. According to Marx, the ideology, politics and art which make up the superstructure of a society are all determined by the economic structure of that society. There is a deterministic relationship between the base and the superstructure. Marxist criticism basically seeks to establish a relationship between the economic reality of a period and the literature of that period. On the other hand, it is both a historical study and the politization of literature which is to regard literature within an economic and political context. The economic system of a society creates a social reality and

that reality creates literature which is relevant to the social reality of that society. As it has already been mentioned above, Marxism in literature and theory develops from the nineteenth century realistic literature and makes use of its basic concepts. The literature created on the basis of socialist realism that preaches Marxism expresses the social process of change from capitalism to communism. For example, the protagonist of a Marxist novel is expected to be a hero who goes through a process of change in which he becomes a Marxist. The Marxist writers do not reject the theory of literary realism which is both descriptive and prescriptive but try to be didactic and reformative. Marx himself states; "The philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways; the point is to change it" (qtd in Selden & Widdowson, 1993: 70). Among the literary genres especially the novel talks about Marxist social types and takes them to the status of heroism.

Marxist literature describes human experience in terms of economic determinism and divides the fictional characters into two groups. The first group is the social types that represent the corrupt bourgeois and the other is the revolutionary Marxist heroes. Marxist writers have the tendency to think of social classes rather than the individuals. They write such a literature in which the capitalist villains and Marxist heroes are sharply contrasted with each other.

Marxist literary theory assumes that literature must be understood in a context of historical and social reality. Marx was contradicting the widely accepted doctrines and trying to change people's thought. For him, philosophy has always been a mere contemplation and it was time that it engaged with the real world. People have always believed that "their ideas, their cultural life, their legal systems, and their religions were the creations of human and divine reason, which should be regarded as the unquestioned guides to hu-

man life" (Selden & Widdowson, 1993: 71). Marx thinks of this formulation and says that all ideological systems are the products of real social and economic existence. The interests of the dominant social class determine how people see human existence. Under the light of this assertion, then, legal systems are not to be considered the manifestations of human or divine reason for they reflect the interests of the dominant class in particular periods. The relations of exploitation and domination in a society determine the whole cultural life of that society. While Marx regards the economic aspect of a society as the determinant of other aspects he also recognizes that art, philosophy and literature are relatively autonomous and possess an independent ability to change men's existence.

Literature is one of the elements of the superstructure of a society and, according to Lukacs "it is the crystallization of the socio-economic reality of a society" (1988:89). The literature of a period is shaped by the base. Literature makes a critique of the time and "the greatest literary works do not merely reproduce the dominant ideologies of their time but incorporate in their form a critique of these ideologies" (Caudwell, 1988: 89). Lukacs argues that Marxist criticism defines the response of literature to its time in terms of criticism. For example, the Victorian novel is both a portrayal of the middle-class and a criticism of the Victorian manners and middle-class. The realistic nineteenth century novel which Lukacs is most sympathetic to is not just "mimetic but incorporates recognition of the contradictions within bourgeois society" (Lukacs, 1988: 91).

Marxist criticism has two purposes; to find out how literature reflects its time and to see to what extent literature becomes a critique of its period. "The quality of popularity is central to both the aesthetics and the politics. A work of art of any period achieves this quality by expressing a high level of social

awareness, revealing a sense of the true social conditions and feelings of a particular epoch. It will also possess a progressive outlook, glimpsing the developments of the future in the lineaments of the present, and giving a sense of the ideal possibilities of social development from the point of view of the mass of working people" (Selden & Widdowson, 1993: 73-74). Works of art and literature then should aim at changing the current corrupt bourgeois structure of a society.

The other important issue of Marxist criticism is that the economic base of a society dominates the forms and the genres of literature. So even though literature makes a critique of its time it cannot perform its revolutionary mission since this mission is subverted by traditional discourses. Marxist criticism supports the kind of literature in which the proletarian types become the characters. This kind of literature focuses for its material and typology on the proletarian, the underprivileged and the revolutionary. The working class types are given prestige.

Structural Marxism, on the other hand, aims at the analysis of the structures of power and consumerism in a society. In the 1960s and 70s collectivism was emphasized. We see the criticism of consumerism and commodity fetishism which are internal colonialism. There is a worship of the object without really studying the object itself and through advertisements people are conditioned for a product. The product is turned into an ideal object that the individual admires and possesses. In relation to this conditioning of people to a certain product Caudwell asserts; "The next phase of bourgeois poetry is therefore that of 'commodity-fetishism'- or 'art for art's sake'- and is given in the false position of the bourgeois poet as producer for the market, a position forced on him by the development of bourgeois economy" (1988:87).

Marxist criticism is against 'art for art's sake' for it is also a kind of commodity fetishism. An artist creates for the needs of the

bourgeoisie, people who have money to buy the works of art. So this kind of art is commercialized and serves the economic purpose of the capitalist ideology. The author sees this bourgeoisie market as the public. In other words, the public is the bourgeoisie market that has the capital to buy. As Caudwell puts it in his article, "the public is a capitalistic, fetishistic and consumerist public. To the poet the bourgeois market appears as the 'public.' The invention and development of printing and publishing was part of the development of the universal bourgeois free market...so the poet now writes for men of whose existence he is ignorant, whose social life, whose whole mode of being is strange to him. The market is for him "The Public-blind, strange, passive" (1988:88). The appreciation of art and literature is professionalized, dominated by the market economy and limited to a privileged section of the ruling class. On the other hand, underprivileged people are disregarded and marginalized. When a writer writes for the public he writes for the bourgeoisie class. So the writer earns money and becomes part of the consumer society and consumerism. "In so far as he 'writes for money' of course he acquires a purely capitalist mentality. He may even himself exploit labour by means of secretaries and hacks who do his 'donkey-work' for him. But the man who writes for money is not an artist" (Caudwell, 1988: 89). The writer is not actually writing for the working class but as Benjamin observes "he is working in the service of certain class interests" (1988:93). So the author is unable to be revolutionary. The literature produced by him is dominated by the bourgeoisie discourse.

True Marxist literature should aim at the truthful depiction of reality which is the reality of the working class people. In the capitalist system, "people mostly work for peanuts. Their future, hopes, happiness as well as labour have been stolen" (Görmez, 2013: 158). As socialism is concerned for the truth the true Marxist literature should reflect

the truth of a society. "The theoretical basis of this alliance is socialism's concern for the truth. In no other aesthetic does the truthful depiction of reality have so central a place as in Marxism" (Lukacs, 1988: 90). The hostile stand against lower classes should be eliminated through Marxist literature and criticism.

Marxist literature is a progressive literature because it tries to privilege the proletariat and criticizes the dynamics of the bourgeoisie. The ground of Marxist theories is the material and historical existence of human societies and these theories are about the historical changes and conflicts which arise in societies and appear indirectly in literary form. The Marxist critics apply Marxism to literature and have such range of approaches; literature as a critique, literature as the reflection, literature as an activity dominated by the hegemony of capitalists.

The point in Marxist criticism is that literature cannot be separated or isolated from the ideological and the economic realities of the society in which this literature is produced. There is a correlation between literature and society. So the author must represent the social reality and become the spokesman of his society. If this social reality is ignored or eliminated then the literature created becomes artificial. Literature should become a documentary of the social reality.

Even though it is relatively possible to study Marxist literary theorists and those of the Frankfurt School as belonging to two different schools from each other, the Frankfurt School is not totally different from orthodox Marxism, especially economically and politically. The radical change and the difference of critique between the two schools lie on the intellectual basis. The intellectual ground for the Frankfurt School is informed by Hegel, but the members of the school were also influenced by Kant, a neo-Platonist, by the writings of Marx, by Nietzsche, Freud and Weber. They were not affected only by the Marxist

theoretical ideas but by a variety of writers' theoretical ideas which imply the pluralist attitudes of this school. The Frankfurt School presents an apparent complexity probably because of the diversity of the writers under whose influences they developed their theoretical ideas (Caudwell, 1988: 88).

The members of the Frankfurt School borrowed from the theorists of the late-nineteenth century. Its members were basically pluralists. The Frankfurt School, which is practically a neo-Marxist one, is a critique of the enlightenment tradition. As an Institute for Social Research originally, the Frankfurt School developed a neo-Marxist social theory. As Selden and Widdowson observe, the key terms to remember are "critical theory" and "praxis" as distinguished from the orthodox Marxism (1993:87). Enlightenment tradition argues that reason will occasion liberation, the more knowledge you have the more liberated you are. Reason leads people to liberation. The Frankfurt School argues through this notion of critical theory. They reject any formal pre-established theory, the enlightenment tradition and a life based on the absolute. They rather argue that truth is conceived by the contingent. The members of this school applied Marxism to a radical interdisciplinary social theory and studied on a theory of society based on Marxism and Hegelian philosophy. It is possible to see the basic Marxist concepts in the writings of this school, but we also see the utilization of the insights of psychoanalysis, sociology and existential philosophy. One major critical theory of them was based on the social relations within capitalist economic systems. A couple of prominent subjects of their study were fascism and authoritarianism. Although they seemed to have disavowed the orthodox Marxism they remained deeply critical of capitalism.

A Marxist theory argues that it is not the consciousness of man that determines his being, but the social consciousness that de-

termines his being. The material foundation of culture is economic, and art changes with correspondence to economic conditions. Marxist criticism tends to claim that the literary text is determined by the historical and economic changes. Marxism looks at the extra textual elements that affect the text like economy, society and history (Ridley, 1982: 170). In Frankfurt School, we see a reinterpretation of Marxism in light of the difference between theory and practice. This is where the notion of praxis comes in; any kind of social action that is engaged with people's lives should be based on the intellectual grounds, whereas orthodox Marxism claims that everything is engaged solely in human behavior, social and economic relations. As one of the scholars indicates, "praxis suggests that one has both intellectual ascent and practice, the intellectual ascent is coupled with practice. Praxis is the combination of intelligence and practice, it is socio-cognitive. You have society, culture and human behaviour as the Marxist School implies, but there is also the intellectuality (Jennings, 1983: 550). Orthodox Marxism was practicing the social theory and absolute but the Frankfurt School rejected the notion of absolute. Adorno well exemplifies the point in his critique of Brecht claiming that "Brecht was too much orthodox and Marxist as his plays focused only on the economic and social grounds" (Nagele, 1991: 75). There is a debate between positivism and pragmatism in the Frankfurt School. They also explored the relation between Freud and Marx; they are combined in the critical theory of the Frankfurt School for they tried to grab a social and psychological basis. The reevaluation of enlightenment philosophy and rationality is another way of understanding the critical theory of the Frankfurt School. An important characteristic of this school is that most of the motives in which critical theory is expressed were not centered on literary aesthetics, but on other aesthetics.

The Frankfurt School asserts that it is necessary to go beyond formalism in order to

experience freedom. They are obviously being critical of the formalist criticism and Russian formalist criticism. One must go beyond this type of criticism in order to liberate the text. According to the Frankfurt School, a great art illuminates aspects of social reality while at the same time criticizes it. Truth is not arrived at only by one way of looking for it. You have to look for truth in every possible direction and contraries. The concept of "embracing contraries" provides us with the ways leading to the truth for this method is engaged in a dialect between opposites in a much more revelatory way. One should analyze the opposite elements to arrive at truth. One is supposed go through the dialectic in order to arrive at the absolute. One can arrive at it by experiencing contradictions. As Adorno puts it, "unlike the theory of orthodox Marxism, art does not only reflect social tendencies, but it preserves personal subjectivity, too" (Kauffman, 1988: 520).

The members of Frankfurt School remain true to Marxist theory, but they are neo-Marxists, they condemn the kind of elitist, authoritarian society and they criticize industrial capitalism. They see literature as a production of industrial capitalism, but they claim that literature also synthesizes the truth with capital "T" and the truth with small "t." According to the Frankfurt School, truth can be arrived at through social-constructionism. Truth does not have to reside in the absolute; it has to reside in social masses. The combination of embracing contraries which consists of thesis and anti-thesis provides a synthesis, for the Frankfurt School. They combine the Hegelian dialectic and Marxism, in a sense. When one embraces the contraries he or she creates the synthesis. This is the way how truth claims to come into being. We should arrive at truth not by an absolute but through dialectic of all differences and contraries.

Art and literature have a privileged place in the Frankfurt School, because they remain the only sphere in which the domination of the totalitarian society can be resisted.

One of the members of this school, Jameson explores dialectical aspects of Marxist theories of literature and claims that "dialectical criticism does not isolate individual works from the larger structure of the group of works" (Nagele, 1991: 80). He is very interested in how history relates to the text. History is not a text, but as one reads literature it becomes reality, it becomes reality through fiction. Reality presents itself in the form of stories, so all narratives need an interpretation.

Another important member of the Frankfurt School is Walter Benjamin. He was also under the influence of Marxism and showed an inclination to Marxist School, too. Benjamin mixes social criticism and linguistic analysis with historical nostalgia. The fundamental aesthetic differentiation for him is the one between creation and formation. As he claims, "Creation means a production from nothing, to bring forth the world from nothing whereas art does not create from nothing; it gives form to the formless. So, the formless is not yet something, but neither is it nothing" (Benjamin, 1968: 56). Benjamin calls it chaos. Giving form to chaos may seem like creation, because something appears where there was not something, but neither nothing. Life appears not as a substance but more as an undulating vibration or oscillation, a trembling. There is no form yet but beauty and harmony undulating through the chaos. Only when this undulation is captivated and petrified in a moment, then the form is born, and with it, the work of art. A violent, petrifying intervention, a caesura must take place. The petrifying caesura that intervenes with a violent cut in the trembling and undulation of life is also the constitution of meaning. The effect of caesura is a change that destroys something and constitutes something else. It destroys expression in order to bring an otherness, an inexpressive power that interferes with any expressive subjectivity. Something behind the poet interrupts his or her poetry and constitutes it only,

then, as poetry, for example (Benjamin, 1988: 94).

According to Benjamin, the writer is a producer. Like manual workers a writer applies his labour to the production of objects, which others then buy and sell. He supplies a production and distribution apparatus which he neither owns nor controls. Benjamin introduces the idea of literature as a social production and the author as a producer in addition to his theories in the modernist movement. He argues that history needs to be reinterpreted and reordered in the service of present causes, which it does not naturally lie in any one direction. He believes "in the ability of the intellectual to discover and create streams in history, to rechannel the past in the cause of the present" (1968:65). He thinks that it could be interpreted only from the standpoint of the immediate and present moment. According to Benjamin, "Works of art have the ability to anticipate and reflect changes in the socio-economic base, art could act as liberation of the productive capacities, language, the status of the work of art, the nature of the symbolic and allegorical literature and the task of the critic are the themes present in all his work. Benjamin's criticism does not aim to help the reader understand a difficult text. The literary text is a privileged object, because it is a language, a site of continuous revelation. Its being is a mode of the presentation of the meaning. The text does not remain unchanged; it is a life in a process of constant development, of revealing its truth" (Cowan, 1981: 110). Criticism is the presentation of truth of a work of art. Criticism tries to culminate, complete and systematize what the work of art began. So, criticism is the activity through which the text reaches its end. Criticism is a mode of textual development. It tries to reveal the truth content of the text, the business of criticism, then, is to extract the truth. Benjamin's texts suggest that all forms of writing, even critical essays must adapt

their techniques to the changing conditions of reception.

For Benjamin, the effort to transcend subjectivity and integrate the finite world and transcendental realm is privileged over any affirmation of individuality. The fragments of truth are present in the world and in particular in the works of literature. Truth is present in the world, albeit hidden in fragmentary form. The truth content of literature is fragmentary, hidden behind a welter of baser matter. "It is the task of criticism to make these fragments visible and dominant. The work of literature is itself something mutable and transitional. The work of criticism itself may stand beside the work of literature as an important and necessary contribution to its fulfillment" (Stein, 1990: 1720).

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