



Cultural Materialism In The Selected Short Stories Of K. V. Dominic: A Critique

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Abstract:

Cultural materialism can be defined as an anthropological research orientation, originally introduced by Marvin Harris in his book *The Rise of Anthropological Theory* as a theoretical paradigm and research strategy. It is the greatest achievement of his work. This concept is further developed by Harris subsequently in his 1979 book *Cultural Materialism* in which he argues that social change is dependent of three factors: a society's infrastructure, structure, and super structure. These elements are well wrought in many of the literary works. Hence there is a growing need to analyze short stories from an anthropological point of view. Short story, as a branch of fiction existed in different forms in the past like fables, fairy tales and ballads, but short stories as a genre has evolved only in the nineteenth century. The present study is based on the selected short stories from the maiden anthology *Who is Responsible?* by K. V. Dominic. There are various issues dealt with in this anthology. The present article is an attempt to reveal the various aspects of culture as found in the stories. It also throws light on how cultural ecology and cultural materialism affects the people belonging to a specific region.

Key Words: Ecology, Economic determinism, Nature Conservation, Deforestation, Materialism, Society and environment, Multiculturalism, Human-animal relationship.

Multi disciplinary studies have become the latest trend in the field of research especially in the Twenty First Century, of which eco literature is an emerging field of studies. Many theorists and scientists have concentrated on earth as it is the source for human survival. Cultural materialism is an elaborated aspect of dialectical materialism which includes specific cultural, environmental, and other influences and it differs from traditional Marxism with an objective anthropological interpretation, that is neither universal nor historically inevitable. Similar to Marxism, cultural materialism proposes three primary influences on cultural change — infrastructure (technology, economics, demographics), structure (cultural and kinship systems), and superstructure (ideology, religion) — but regards culture more as evolutionary than determined, with infrastructure, especially reproduction, operating as the primary variable in determining cultural development.

Marvin Harris is largely credited with the development of cultural materialism. As a research method, cultural materialism emphasizes the scientific method and objective analysis over the less demonstrable claims of structuralism or the relativism of postmodernism. (“Chegg Study”).

Short stories can be analysed as literary “sites of contest” where there are multiple themes and different voices merge (6). The aim of this paper is to propagate the dominant values that take up the central position of the texts, and to expose those marginal voices that have been subdued, silenced or simply erased with a special attention to the cultural materialism, ecological issues and background of the environment as portrayed in the selected short stories. The paper also analyses the selected short stories using Gramsci’s idea of hegemony as a negotiable, perpetually threatened

and recreated system, as opposed to Althusser's economic determinism.

Cultural Materialism is a term employed by Raymond Williams. It has Marxist orientation but differs in the aspect that it is oriented toward political intervention. It is the transformation of a social order which exploits people on the ground of race, gender and class. Marx suggested that there are three levels of culture, infrastructure, structure, and superstructure; however, unlike Marxist theory, cultural materialism views both productive (economic) and reproductive (demographic) forces as the primary factors which shape society. As stated by Harris, cultural materialism strives to "create a pan-human science of society whose findings can be accepted on logical and evidentiary grounds by the pan-human community" (xii). Many of the readers are interested in reading short stories than novels as it could be read in a sitting. The present paper traces the materialistic culture in the selected short stories from the maiden anthology *Who is Responsible?* by K. V. Dominic. The anthology has varied themes like sense of loneliness, problems of old age, terrorism, humanism and compassion, corruption, religious exploitation and so on. The anthology is abundant with themes on environment like the beauty of animal world, love and compassion towards animals, exploitation of forests, conversion and conservation. There are fifteen short stories in this anthology of which eight stories were taken for analysis.

According to Cultural Materialists, as seen in the key concepts of the "Priority of Infrastructure",

. . . all societies operate according to model in which production and reproduction dominate and determine the other sectors of culture effectively serving as the driving forces behind all cultural development. They propose that all non-infrastructure aspects of society are created with the purpose of benefitting societal productive and reproductive capabilities.

Therefore, systems such as government, religion, law, and kinship are considered to be constructs that only exist for the sole purpose of promoting production and reproduction. ("Cultural Materialism")

Harris suggests empirical research and strict scientific methods in order to make accurate comparisons between separate cultures, proponents of cultural materialism believe that its perspective effectively explains both intercultural variation and similarities (27). Further Barefield states that, as such, demographic, environmental, and technological changes are invoked to explain cultural variation (232). The title story, "Who is Responsible?" is a tragic story of the old couple Rehman, a retired teacher and Ramla his wife. Rehman and Ramla had three children, two daughters and a son named Anwar. As Anwar was unable to find a suitable job in his native place, settles in Oman as an electrician and marries Aisha, a beautiful girl, selected by his parents. In India, money forms the main basis for marriage and it is quite natural that Aisha's parents choose Anwar as he earns well.

The colonial rule and western education, modern materialism got into Indian minds has been well wrought by the writer in the following lines: "A bridegroom employed abroad had a high demand in marriage field" (13) shows the materialistic attitude of the Indian parents with girl children. The marriage is like an oasis as Anwar cannot be with his wife at all times. A short while after their marriage, he leaves for Oman and this brings a major issue as Aisha longs for a male company. Soon she grows friendly with Rahul, the chauffeur "accompanied Aisha throughout and entertained her with silly Jokes" (13). Though the couple doubted their daughter-in-law, they cannot mend her as she felt that she is answerable only to her husband and not to her in-laws. Her attitude brings gloom and despair in the household. The couple were shocked to find that their daughter-in-law eloped with the chauffeur.

The old couple were upset and perplexed as they could not muster their strength to inform this to their son. To add to their miseries, Rehman receives a registered post from the Sultanate of Oman. Yet another misfortune befalls the old couple, “with shaking hands he opened the letter. “ The contents of the letter read that Anwar was dismissed from his company as he had been arrested by the government under the charge of involvement in terrorist activities” (16). This is a final blow to him. The next morning the couple were found dead in their house. “The police came and searched every nook and corner of the house for any evidence of the crime. It was found that the safe where ornaments and money were kept was opened and the contents were stolen” (18).

The writer though works on a social theme does not fail to describe the beauty and natural scenery of the place. “He is reclining in an arm chair watching rafts, barges, canoes, cruisers and houseboats carrying cargos, passengers and tourists to and fro” (11). In almost all the stories nature forms the backdrop. This is because the stories were set in Kerala, God’s own land, which brims with nature’s bounty. The writer describes the compound of the cruel neighbour thus: “There were great beauties in his compound which attracted us – butterflies, birds, squirrels, grasshoppers, etc”.

Cultural materialism also promoted the notion that culture change can be studied across geographic and temporal boundaries in order to get at so-called universal, nomothetic theories. Some of Harris’ work shows that logical, scientific explanations for cultural phenomena such as India’s beef taboos are possible without invoking mystical or ephemeral causal factors such as are present in structuralist or functionalist interpretations. (“Anthropological Theories - Cultural Materialism, Catherine Buzney and Jon Marcoux)

“Sanchita Karma” is a best example for the above mentioned concept as it shows how the cruel neighbours, reborn as rats and the soul of the cat’s they killed in their previous birth haunt them. In “Selvan’s house”, the story of an honest labourer, the writer portrays pathetic situation of Selvan, the construction labourer, who had been neglected after the construction of the house. The story is an instance for the difference between the classes – the rich and the poor. The owner of the house did not care to pay the one month salary that was due to Selvan. He even lost his humanism, rejecting Selvan’s plea to continue his work as a watchman. Feeling dejected, Selvan decides to join his family.

The writer brings to the fore the materialistic attitude of people through the following lines: “True, Salim. Honesty is never rewarded in this world. Had Mr. Thomas shown one percent of love you have shown, Selvan could have gone to his house a happy man. The world has become materialistic that love and kindness have no place here” (92). In yet another stories, “Twisted Course of Destiny” and “Best Government Servant” the writer focuses on unemployment problem that is prevalent in Kerala. Though the protagonists were highly educated, could not find a suitable job as they belong to upper caste.

The writer being a native of Kerala, brings in the texture of nature and the aroma of nature is spread throughout the anthology. For instance, in “World Environment Day” the writer becomes poetical when describing the scene:

Being their own day, the forest and its inhabitants were celebrating. Gentle breeze kissed and stroked all trees, birds and animals. One could sense the mirth of the nature from the chirping of birds, laughing of leaves, mating calls and other happy cries of animals. The teak sensed the advent of its death and cried for help. (113)

The above lines portray the writer's love for nature. He vehemently criticises the illegal cutting of trees from the forest. Forest is an abode for many creatures big and small but the humans' mindless attitude destroys the beauty of forests. The writer wants to stress the readers that even lower creatures have emotion like us and wants everyone to follow the Buddhist principle, "Live and Let live". The writer at the same time, does not fail to picture the plight of the tribal people crushed by the forest authorities as well as the government. One of the major threats to the environment is deforestation. The bureaucracy of the government authorities in misappropriating the funds allotted for tribal people are well wrought in the story. Katturaja, an illegal son of a tribal woman swears to revenge the forest official and cuts the valuable trees from the forest. As an uneducated youth, Katturaja does not understand the implication of felling trees. Thus he becomes a source of deforestation, threatening the ecosystem.

The writer Preaches moral through the speech of the tree, which brings transformation in the forest thief, Katturaja. He realises his mistake and determines to repent for his past deeds. He surrenders to the court, confesses his misdeeds and pleads to the judges that he would devote the rest of his life in preserving the forests he has destroyed. Through this story, the writer wants people to change their materialistic attitude and live in kinship with nature.

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