

## Holding Up a Mirror

### Literature and Society

**Balzac: Mirror of Emerging Modern Capitalism** by Girish Mishra;

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It is now generally accepted that cultural productions at any given point in the concrete histories of communities bear intimate relation to other areas of productive human labour. In his considerations of the nature of 'ideology' Marx was to suggest in *The German Ideology* (1846) and again in *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* (1859) how those in control of the means of production at any given moment in the social development of communities succeed also in largely appropriating a whole body of cultural ideas which are then used to legitimise material dominance as such, cultural ideas are then accorded the status of universal truths. The fact, however, is that literary and other 'artistic' texts find existence and meaning in the 'world' – if one may use the rather inflated term made current by Edward Said – although there is even in our day no dearth of ideologues and pundits (not just in the west but in the so-called post-colonial Asian and African regions as well) who propagate that 'true' culture is the just preserve of only a few of god's chosen people, that the culture that such 'elect' inhabit and radiate bears no connections with the messy involvements of surrounding histories, and that the transcendently self-evident value of such culture ought to be used, to borrow Raymond Williams' telling phrase, as the 'last court of appeal' as we seek to assess the acceptability or otherwise of human individuals, groups and propensities of the 'other'.

Thankfully, nevertheless, such insistence is now commonly recognised for what it is – a form of special pleading on behalf of the vested. We also know that in every unequal social order, from the very ancient to the contemporary, there have

existed and exist forms of culture which, with varying degrees of critical sentence, have resisted/resist the oppressive semantic/social burden of the more endorsed official forms of culture. Mikhail Bakhtin, the 20th century Russian theorist of the ideology of aesthetics, who was the first to show how specific forms of narrative relate to specific conjunctions of historical time and space – coining for that conjunction the resonant term 'Chronotope' (in his *The Dialogical Imagination*) was to explore elaborately those breaches in the suffocating unities of 'high culture' which through time have yielded subversive forms of cultural expression.

#### Literature as Mirror to Society

Not infrequently, such subversive subtexts are to be found within the work of writers who may not have altogether shed their subjective allegiance to dominant ideological forms. And when in the work of such writers critiques of those dominant forms are openly embraced the works thus produced are often ones of the highest consequence, especially where the writer also happens to be master of imaginative skills not available to others. Marx and Engels were perhaps the first of the moderns to recognise and celebrate this. Thus, in theorising the beginnings of 'exchange' as the centre-pin of capitalist social organisation, Marx was to draw illustration from Shakespeare's *Timon of Athens*. He was also to record how he felt he had learnt more about the relations of production of industrial capitalist society of the first half of the 19th century from reading the novels of Mrs Gaskell, Charles Dickens and Thackeray than from the expository work of 19th century sociologists. Both Marx and Engels regarded Balzac as the most critically significant and masterful of French novelists of the period between the era of Napoleon Bonaparte and the bourgeois-national revolution of 1848 for the reason that, although Balzac remained self-confessedly a monarchist and anti-republican, nowhere was a more trenchant critique of

the 'ancien regime' and a more clear-headed understanding of the causes of its dethronement by the newer mercantile bourgeois class (to use the term that Balzac was the first to use, the 'nouveaux riche') to be found than in his *Comedie Humaine*.

Those insights were to be built upon extensively by the Hungarian theorist, George Lukacs. In his *Studies in European Realism* (1972) Lukacs was to show how the great critical contribution of that realist tradition was to unmask the reified social relations that developing capitalism was spawning, so that the forms of the 19th century novelistic tradition revealed scathingly the forms of the contemporary history of the times.

Girish Mishra's examination of the work of Balzac falls within the theoretical/critical ambit of the foregoing structure of the socially and aesthetically intertwined history. Recognising the often inseparable interface between modes of production and ideological/superstructural deconstructions and constructions, Mishra impressively and comprehensively outlines Balzac's extraordinary contributions to our understanding of such interface as an unmitigating participant/critic of the dynamics of social development in France between Bonaparte and the events of 1848. Mishra evidences his masterful hold on the French political economy of the ancien regime in three chapters, where he lays bare the fault lines which inevitably led first to the revolution, then to the rise of Napoleon, then to empire, then to the upheavals of 1830 as the bourgeois classes installed Louis Phillippe, and finally to the bourgeoisie's complete victory in 1848. Although this seems like straightforwardly a historical account, Mishra's presentation is frequently illuminated by reference to cultural texts of the relevant period.

In subsequent chapters, Girish Mishra draws copiously on Balzac's enormous corpus and uses his enactments both to underscore the human/social consequences of the changing relations of production and to suggest the trenchant quality of Balzac's awareness and critique. The all-embracing impact of the new money-economy is explored in its bearings upon the 'social structures', for gender relations between the now destabilised and mobile social classes, for the transforming 'politics' through the period, and for the beginnings of a crime-economy of the modern kind as an 'underworld' of pimps, fixers, madams, aristocrats 'manque', pretenders and cut-throats and murders comes to the

fore as a fallout of the new political economy.

### The Indian 'Silence'

For a teacher of economics Girish Mishra's breadth of reading in Balzac and other literary/cultural texts is here most impressive, as is his ability to select just the right contexts from Balzac to make his point. But this should not surprise, since it has been Mishra's view that often insights about the dynamics of lived histories are often to be found in the more overtly cultural/imaginative forms of production than in expository writing merely. This reviewer has heard him bemoan the failure, for example, of much contemporary Indian writing to do what a Dickens or a Balzac – not to name a long line of others – did in their own time, as the dynamics of our own complicated social histories seems to bypass even some of our best-known poets and novelists. Lukacs had made the point that the French writers after 1848 (after Balzac who died in 1850)

– a Flaubert, a Hugo, a George Sand, a Zola – although endowed with great skills of enactment, seemed, after the victory of the bourgeoisie, to write not as interventionists but as professional chroniclers of the human scene, taking events that had occurred as irreversible. As a consequence, the fatigue and ennui which came later to be associated with the 'modernist' moment towards the end of the 19th century and the consequent diminution into subjectivism, loneliness and other esoteric quests are already, in a sense, present in their defeatist stance. It may be said that perhaps many of our own writers – from about the end of the Progressive Writer's Movement – seemed to take over those esoteric mantles without the trouble in-between to engage with exploring the social/human consequences of our own nationalist/capitalist 'rise' between then and now. It is to be hoped that a labour such as Girish Mishra's Balzac will provoke some Balzacian enterprise among those now writing in India as we 'globalise'. **EPW**