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## The Historical Development of the Sociological Approach to the Study of Literature

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### **Abstract:**

*The sociological approach to the study of literature has long and distinguished history. The several critics and scholars from Plato down to the present have discussed the different theories of sociological approach to the study of literature. The early social thinker and literary critics such as J. C. Herder, Madame de Stale, H. A. Taine and others laid the foundation of the sociological approach of literature, but they ignored the world view of the writer and the role of publishers, distributors, critics, reading public and circulating libraries in the creation and existence of literary works. However, sociology of literature has gained its special place in the history of critical theory in the late twentieth century in the hands of Lucien Goldman, Leo Lowenthal, Robert Escarpit, Alan Swingwood, John Hall and the several social thinkers and critics. In this article an attempt has been made to focus the major contributors who tried to develop the sociological approach to the study of literature.*

**Key words:** Sociological approach, literature, social thinker, Lucien Goldman, Leo Lowenthal, Robert Escarpit, Alan Swingwood, John Hall

### **1. Introduction**

The sociological approach to the study of literature has long and distinguished history. The several critics and scholars from Plato down to the present have discussed the different theories of sociological approach to literature. They believed in the simple conviction that literature is a social product, and thoughts and feelings found in literature are conditioned and shaped by the cultural life created by the society. The early critics did not doubt the reciprocal relationship between literature and society. Plato, who started the discussion of the relationship between literature and society, raised some questions about social implications of literature. However, his concern was primarily for social hygiene. He thought that poetry could make man sentimental and impair his reason. But Aristotle's answer to Plato's objections established the sound ground for the sociological approach to literature. During the eighteenth century, it became more sound and powerful with the emergence of novel. Accepting de Boland's Maxim that literature is 'an expression of society' the modern social critics and novelists considered the novel as the realistic picture of the society. Matthew Arnold's *Culture and Anarchy* also extended the fact that literature can not be adequately understood without its cultural and social context. The romantic spirit of the nineteenth century rebelled against the classical aesthetics and paved a more favourable ground to sociological perception of literature. However, it was H. A. Taine who tried to systematize the sociological approach to literature in a scientific way. His *History of English Literature* (1886) is really the landmark in the history of literature. Karl Marx, Frederic Engels and their followers made the valuable contribution in sociological criticism. They looked at literature as economic infrastructure of society, and gave a new turn to sociology of literature.

### **2. Historical Development of the Sociological Approach to the Study of Literature**

The survey of the literary study shows diverse views and theories of literature and its function in society. Although sociological approach to the study of literature has long and distinguished history from Plato onwards, it has gained its special place in the history of critical theory in the late twentieth century in the hands of Lucien Goldman, Leo Lowenthal, Robert Escarpit, Alan Swingwood, Diana Laurenson John Hall and the several social thinkers and critics. In order to understand the development of the sociological approach to the study of literature, it is necessary to see the historical development of this approach through the contribution of the social critics and scholars. The Major among them are as follows.

### 2.1. J. C. Herder (1744-1803)

Jonathan Herder, a German philosopher and critic, is best known for his contribution to the philosophy of history and culture. In his *Idea for Philosophy of History for Mankind* (1791), he displays ambivalence towards the goals of rationalism and enlightenment. Herder believed that certain social and geographical environment, race and customs, and cultural and political conditions in particular areas are responsible for the emergence and development of literature. His writing is a challenge to the ideas of Immanuel Kant who argues that a sense of beauty could result only from a purely disinterested judgment. He believes in social structure as the base of literature. Kant gives importance to aesthetic qualities of literature where as Herder gives importance to social aspects of literature. In this context Alan Swingwood comments: "Herder argued that each work was rooted in a certain social and geographical environment where it performed specific functions and that there was no need for any judgment of value: everything is as it had to be" (26). In short, Herder's ideas about literature imply that there is the casual connection between literature and culture, race, customs and social institutions.

### 2.2. Madame de Stale (1766-1817):

Madame de Stale, a French-Swiss writer and an early champion of women's rights, is considered as the first woman who contributed to infuse new ideas and methods into French literature. Like Herder, she relates literature to climate, geography and social institutions. She examines the influence of social and political institutions on literature. According to James H. Barnett "... the writings of Madame de Stale, especially her *On Literature Considered in its Relations with Social Institutions*, (1800), discusses the relation of race and climate to literary style and the effects of women and religion on art" (621).

Stale's concept of literature is somewhat broad. According to her, everything that involves the exercise of thought in writing is literature and it is characterized by climatic situations and national character. For example, the novel form does not get popularity in Italy because of its licentious nature and little respect for women. She believes that national character is the result of complex interactions between religious, legal and political institutions. In this context Swingwood writes: "Madame de Stale has an interesting observation here, arguing that the novel form could develop only in those societies where women's status was fairly high and when strong interest in the private life existed" (27).

Madame de Stale's works show positive sociological insight. Besides the awareness of the role of women, she grasps the importance of a strong middle class for the growth and development of literature. She thinks that both women and middle class produce virtue and liberty, the important pre-requisite of literature. To her literature is the expression of the national character which seems to mean simply 'the spirit of the time'. Her emphasis was mainly on climate and national character. Her ideas about the relation between literature and society are empirical. She wanted that literature should portray important changes in the social order, especially those that indicate movement toward the goals of liberty and justice.

### 2.3. Hippolyte Taine (1828-1893)

Hippolyte Taine, who for the first time tried to provide a systematic formula of 'race, milieu and moment' to comprehend and analyze literature in the context of the sociological approach to the study of literature, is regarded as the father of the sociology of literature. His *History of English Literature* (1871) contains an awareness of the basic problems which face any literary sociology. The book begins with the expression: "A literary work was no mere individual play of imagination, the isolated caprice of an excited brain, but a transcript of contemporary manners, a manifestation of a certain kind of mind" (Vol.I:1).

Taine regards literature not as the expression of personality, as explained by the romanticists, but the collective expression of society embodying the spirit of the age and formative factors behind the emergence of this expression are 'race, milieu and moment'. The interaction of this triad produces a speculative mental structure which leads to the development of the 'general ideas which find expression in great art and literature. So Alan Swingwood states: "In the history of the sociology of literature Taine's is the first real theory, far more systematic than those of Madam de Stale and Herder, and constituting rather more than a collection of haphazard and random insight" (33). His method of studying the problems was naturalistic, empirical and rationalistic in its approach. His outlook to literature as the combination of 'race, milieu and moment' is systematic and scientific. He believes that literary works are the national monuments because they represent the consciousness of the society and the spirit of the age. In order to explain Taine's concept of literature as a social document or national monument, Alan Swingwood states: "Taine wrote that a literary work was no mere individual play of imagination, the isolated caprice of excited brain, but a transcript of contemporary manners a manifestation of a certain kind of mind (32).

While explaining Taine's views on 'race, milieu and moment', Henning quotes:

A race is found which has received its character from the climate, the soil, the elements, and the great events which it underwent at its origin. This character has adapted it and reduced it to the cultivation of a certain spirit as well as to conception of a certain beauty. This is the *national soil*, very good for certain plants, but very bad for others, unable to bring to maturity the seeds of the neighbouring country, but capable of giving its own exquisite sap and perfect efflorescence when the course of the centuries brings about the temperature which they need. Thus was born *La Fontaine* in France in the seventeenth century, Shakespeare in England during Renaissance, Goethe in the Germany of our day. For genius is nothing but a power developed and no power can develop completely, except in the country where it finds itself naturally and completely at home, where education nourishes it, where examples make it strong, where character sustains it, where the public challenges it (354).

Taine categorizes the novel as a portable mirror reflecting all aspects of life and nature. To him novel is the dominant genre of industrial society. His discussion of literature in the *History of English literature* makes it clear that he gives special importance to the

'milieu' that produces 'the state of mind' necessary for artistic creation. He believed in 'race milieu and moment' as the major determinants of literature. In this regard W. H. Hudson argues, "Taine's interest in reality was not in literature as literature but in literature as a social document in the history of national psychology" (39).

#### 2.4. Karl Marx (1818-1883) and Frederick Engels (1820-1895)

With the spread of the ideas of Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, the sociological approach became a scientific method of literary interpretation. Taine argues literature as the expression of 'race, milieu and moment', but Marx and Engel view it as epiphenomenon of the social structure. They were more concerned with purely economic factors and the role played by the social class. They thought that the essence, the nature and function of art and literature could be understood by relating it to the prevailing social conditions and by analyzing the social system as the whole. Literature and art, as considered by them, are forms of social consciousness and social change is bound to create changes in literature and art. According to James Barnett "Marx held that the system of production in existence in given time determines both the content and styles of arts of the society. On the basis of this type of analysis, plus his commitment to the doctrine of the inevitability of class conflict, Marx argued that every art preferences differ according to class position and outlook" (621).

Both Marx and Engels analyze literature in terms of material foundations. Their main concern is to demonstrate the relation between the material and aesthetic modes of production. It is in this context they talk about the relationship between base and superstructure. Their ideas in *The German Ideology* explain that productive relations and productive methods determine the character of culture. The forms of consciousness are determined by the social being of men. The economic structure is the foundation, on which rise the superstructure comprising legal and political constructs at a given time, and the social change or the social revolution is brought about by the complex process of mutual action and reaction of the base and superstructure. While explaining the economic casualty of literature, they state, "In the social production of their inner life, men enter into definite relations that are indispensable and independent of their well relations of productions which correspond to a definite stage of development of their material productive forces. The sum total of these relations of production constitutes economic structure of society, the real foundation, on which rise legal and political superstructure and to which correspond definite forms of social consciousness. (363). They also state that the nature and mode of economic production create social relations in which men enter to form class relations and these class relations become the ideology of the society. Literature tries to stabilize this ideology.

The influence of Marx and Engels on literature and literary criticism has been tremendous. The major contributions of these scholars in the sociological approach to the study of literature are: *On Literature and Art*, *Selected Works Vol. I*, *The German Ideology*, and *The Holy Family*. However, there is no fashioned theory of relations of literature with society, but, their followers contributed greatly in the development of the theory.

#### 2.5. George Luckacs

The most prominent Marxist theoretician of literature after Marx and Engels is George Luckacs. He accepts the concept of literature as the reflection of class struggle. In *The Historical Novel* he writes: "The historical novel in its origin, development, rise and decline follows inevitably upon the great social transformations of modern times" (17). He argues that literature that implies socialist perspective is written from the point of view of a class. He criticizes a literary work which denies socialist perspective, according to him the writer who rejects socialism closes his eyes to the future, gives up any chance of assessing the present correctly, and loses the ability to create other than purely static works of art (60). This loss of socialism/humanism leads literature to subjectivist outlook in which man depicted as alienated, isolated, and essentially morbid, lacking any meaningful relation with the social world. For example, in the works of Beckett, Joyce, and Proust man is portrayed as fragmented and partial. However, we get perspective of all-sides of man in the works of Balzac and Dickens. So Luckacs admires bourgeois realists or socialists perspective and admits that the great writers are those who, in their works, create 'lasting human types', the real criterion of literary achievement. He argues that the 'type' flows out of the artist's awareness of progressive change. It constitutes the totality of relations in flux (56-57). So like Engels, he insists that all literature must be measured by bourgeois realism. The major contributions of George Luckacs in the history of the sociology of literature are *The Meaning of Contemporary Realism* (1963), *The Historical Novel* (1963), *Writer and Critic* (1970), *The Theory of the Novel* (1971), and *Studies in European realism* (1972).

#### 2.6. Lucian Goldman

Goldman's contribution in the sociological approach to the study of literature lies in the introduction of dialectical materialism, the sophisticated method of linking art and society. He evolved his theory of genetic structuralism to analyze literary works. According to genetic structuralism, the literary work is a constitutive element of social consciousness and is less related to the level of real consciousness of transindividual subjects. His essay "The Sociology of Literature: Status and Problems of Method" presents some observations of genetic structuralism. According to him, the first general observation on which genetic structuralist thought based is that 'all reflection on the human sciences is made not from without but from within society'. The second basic idea of genetic sociology is that human facts are responses of an individual or collective subject. He further points out that the essential relationship between the life of society and literary creation is not concerned with the content of these two sectors of human reality but only with the mental structures and those mental structures are not individual phenomena but social phenomena (493-495).

Goldman's sociological approach to the study of literature is concerned to structure created and transformed by human activity. To him structures were made through the 'praxis' of the human subject. This subject is nothing but a collective category of a social group

that constitutes the true source of cultural creation. This collective subject is a significant structure. All major cultural forms embody a significant structure, a worldview that expresses the collective consciousness of a significant social group. The worldview unites the various elements and levels of a cultural form into unity and coherence. His major contributions in the field of the sociology of literature are: *The Hidden God* (1956), *Towards a Sociology of Novel* (1964), *The Sociology of Literature: Status and Problems of Method* (1967), *Cultural Creation in Modern Society* (1976), and *Method in the Sociology of Literature* (1981).

### 2.7. Leo Lowenthal (1900–1993)

Lowenthal was a German-Jewish sociologist usually associated with the Frankfurt School. He became a leading expert of the sociology of literature and mass culture after joining the Institute for Social Research in 1926. He, then, conducted seminar on the sociology of literature and wrote essays and books for the sociological study of literature. The notable among them are: *Literature and the Image of Man* (1957) and *Literature, Popular Culture, and Society* (1961). In his introduction to *Literature and the Image of Man* he states:

Creative literature conveys many levels of meaning, some intended by the author, some quite unintentional. An artist sets out to invent a plot, to describe action, to depict the interrelationships of characters, to emphasize certain values . . . The writer indeed develops believable characters and places them in situations involving interactions with others and with the society in which they live. It is the task of the sociologist of literature to relate the experience of the writer's imaginary characters and situations to the historical climate from which they derive. He has to transform the private equations of themes and stylistic means into social equations(X).

### 2.8. Robert Escarpit (1918 - 2000)

Robert Escarpit was a man of many accomplishments comprising an academician, a renowned writer, a professor of comparative literature, a literary historian and a specialist in publishing. He wrote on a variety of topics but his major critical works on the sociological approach is noteworthy. Escarpit's major contribution in the sociological approach to the study of literature is in production and consumption of literary works.

In his famous essay "The Act of Publication: Publication and Creation", he points out the publication system that selects, prints and distributes literary creations is very essential for that the reward of the writer's efforts. By giving the history of the publication and the different roles played by the publishers he states: "Reduced to their material operations, publisher's functions can be summed up in three verbs: choose, manufacture and distribute" (1970:400). In his article "the sociology of literature" published in *International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences* he explains that the sociological approach to literature is by no means an easy one. It conceives the concept of literature first as a socio cultural fact and not an aesthetic one. To the cultured mind the study of the writer as a professional man, of the literary work as a means of communication, and of the reader as a consumer of cultural goods is vaguely mocking. A true sociology of literature appeared only when literary critics and historians, starting from literature as a specific reality, tried to answer sociological questions by using current sociological methods. While explaining the sociology of reading he states that no sociology of literature is therefore possible without sociology of reading and of cultural consumption in general. His major works concerning to the sociological approach to the study of literature includes *A Handbook of English Literature* (1953), *The Sociology of Literature* (1958) and *The Book Revolution* (1965).

### 2.9. Alan Swingwood

Alan Swingwood is a lecturer in Sociology at the London School of Economics and Political Science. In *Myth of Mass Culture* he points out: "The aristocratic theory of mass society is to be linked to the moral crisis caused by the weakening of traditional centers of authority such as family and religion" (5). Another book *Cultural Theory and the Problem of Modernity* (1998) gives a comprehensive account of different sociological theories of culture. In it he discusses in detail the concepts and theories of culture such as hegemony, force field and cultural materialism. His sociological approach to the study of literature is developed in the social and cultural context. In *The sociology of literature*, the most influential book written with Diana Laurensen, Swingwood presents the approaches and method of the sociology of literature. In its "Preface" he writes: "This book has been written in the hope that it may serve to introduce the idea of the sociology of literature both to those who believe that social science is simply the study of facts and to those for whom literature is a unique subjective experience which defies scientific analysis" (vii). He also applies this theory to the works of Fielding, Sartre, Camus and George Orwell. His *Marx and Modern Social Theory* (1975) offers an account of the rise of sociological thought from its origins in the eighteenth century. It examines the paradigms of functionalism cultural theory and the problem of modernity, critical analysis of the relation between sociological theory and recent debates in cultural studies. In his *A Short History of Sociological Thought* (1984) Swingwood throws light on the several aspects and theories of sociology from its origin to the modern development.

### 2.10. Some Other Modern Critics

Like Escarpit and Lowenthal the several sociologists and literary critics throw light on the theoretical aspects of the sociology of literature. For instance, Richard Hoggart's works focus English literature and cultural studies with a special concern to British popular culture. His *The Uses of Literacy* (1957) is the most cited work which interprets the loss of an authentic popular culture and the imposition of a mass culture by the culture industries. Laurence Learner, a South African born British literary critic, discusses the determinants of a literary work, the psychology of art, the relationship between literature and society and Lukac's theory of realism in his *Literary imagination* (1982). In the 'Preface' of this book he states: "To study the single work without raising general questions

about its genre, its social, political or even merely human functions, its aesthetic value or its linguistic form, is narrow; but to discuss literary theory without making significant contact with the experience of reading actual works is barren”(x). Rene Wellek collaborated with Austin Warren over a period of years to produce a landmark text *Theory of Literature* (1963) which encompasses “definitions and distinctions” of the natures and functions of literature; literary theory, criticism, and history; and general, comparative, and national literature. Both have discussed an extrinsic approach to the study of literature from the perspectives of biography, psychology, society, ideas, and other arts. In ‘Literature and Society’ they focus on the sociology of the writer, the relationship of the writer with the readers, publishers and the patrons of literature. While discussing the relation between literature and society they write: “The question how far literature is actually determined or dependent on its social setting, on social change and development, is one which, in one way or another, will enter into all the three divisions of our problems: the sociology of the writer, the social content of the works themselves and the influence of literature on society” (96).

The most important work and the land mark in the history the Sociology of Literature is John Hall’s *The Sociology of Literature* (1979). In it John Hall explains in detail the several approaches and methods of the sociology of literature, the major determinants of literature, the sociology of the writer and the role of the reading public in the creation and success of a literary work. Like Hall, Raymond Williams’ *The Long Revolution* (1961), M. C. Albrecht’s *The Sociology of Art and Literature* (1970), Levin Schucking’s *The Sociology of Literary Taste* (1941) Elizabeth and Tom Burns eds. *Sociology of Literature and Drama: Selected Readings* (1973), and the issues of *Critical Inquiry Vol. 14* (Spring, 1988) and *International Social Science Journal, Vol. XIX, No.4*, ed. Peter Lengyel, UNESCO, contributed greatly in the development of the theoretical perspectives of the sociology of literature.

### 3. Conclusion

The historical development of the sociology of literature from Herder and Stale to the contemporary critics and social thinkers shows not only the complementary relationship between literature and sociology but also the several stages in the theory of the sociology of literature. The early social thinker and literary critics such as Herder, Madame de Stale, Hippolyte Taine and others are of the view that certain social, political, cultural and geographical conditions of the day are the major determinants of literature. J. C. Herder believes in social structure where as Madame de Stale emphasizes the climate and national character as the determinants of literature. Hippolyte Taine, on the other hand, has provided a systematic formula of ‘race, milieu, and moment’ to interpret and analyze literature. Although these critics lay the foundation of the sociology of literature, they ignore the world view of the writer and the role of publishers, distributors, critics, reading public and circulating libraries in the creation and existence of literary works. The Marxist approach also ignores these determinants of literary works. The early Marxists use the term ‘base’ to refer to the economic system prevailing in a given society at a given time and the term ‘superstructure’ is used to refer to its political, social and economic ideologies. However, it is in the works of modern sociologists of literature that the focus is given on the world view of the writer and the role of publishers, distributors, critics, reading public and circulating libraries.

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