

A M E R I C A N   U N I V E R S I T Y   S T U D I E S

# Socialist Literature

Theory and Practice

ABDULLA AL-DABBAGH

# | INTRODUCTION

The primary condition for any successful investigation is to start off by connecting literature to society. Literature and ideas generally do not grow in a vacuum. They are always either a means of preserving a particular social system or the means of transforming it in accordance with certain material conditions. People in various societies simply by participating in the process of production, the process of satisfying their living needs, enter into certain production relations with each other. The ideas and the cultures which they produce are expressions, at varied levels of sophistication, of this complex process and these diverse relations of production. With every big change in the material conditions the state of society changes in a way that the old production relations turn into an obstacle that must be removed, and the ideas accompanying those relations turn into meaningless words that have to be replaced by new ideas more suitable to the new circumstances.

It is well-known that sociology divides human society from its early stages until the present-day into five principal types which are: primitive communism; slavery; feudalism; capitalism; and socialism. And although there might be a variety of social formations, these formations will not be more than various combinations of these five principal types. For example, semi-feudal and semi-colonial society which includes a large number of the countries of Asia, Africa and South America is made up principally of a combination of feudal relationships and capitalist relationships.

From another angle these five historically successive types of society can also be divided into two basic kinds: non-exploitative societies, like primitive communism in which there is no exploitation of man by man or socialist society which seeks to put an end to this kind of exploitation—by moving toward communism—and exploitative societies like the slave, feudal and capitalist societies that are built upon the exploitation of man by man. Therefore, all the historical social transformations, with the exception of those which accompanied the downfall of the primitive commune and excepting the socialist revolution, were transformations that aimed, in essence, to substitute one exploitative system by another as, for example, the replacement of slavery by feudalism or the big transformations and revolutions which accompanied the downfall of feudalism and the domination of capitalism.

Ideas, literatures and cultures generally are formed inside the various social systems. They are a means of preserving those systems that could also transform into a means of changing, removing and replacing them by other social systems.

In any historical epoch the ruling class seeks to preserve the social system that serves its interests and seeks to make its ideas, the ideas of preserving the system, the ruling ideas. Its intellectual domination becomes one of the components of its material domination, a fact that has given rise to the famous sociological thesis that in any historical epoch the ruling ideas are always the ideas of the ruling class.

The ruled and exploited classes also express their attempts at changing the social system by ideas that serve their interests in that change. The nearer these attempts get to a total revolution, the more revolutionary their ideas become.

Ideas and cultures in all societies, then, can be divided into two principal kinds: the ideas and cultures of the ruling classes which seek to defend and preserve the existing system and the ideas and cultures of the revolutionary classes which seek revolution and the transformation of the existing system. It must, however, be emphasized that all those ideas and cultures except when scientifically socialist, are alike in that they are *essentially* exploitative, seeking, either to defend an exploitative system or to change it and replace it by *another* exploitative system.

Ancient Greek culture, for example, in spite of the big human advance that it entailed from an abstract intellectual viewpoint, was from the social viewpoint the culture of the slave-owning class, serving the interests of that class and stamped by the particular exploitative nature of that class.

The same thing may be said of modern European culture which, although it had a revolutionary aspect in fighting feudal ideas and feudal culture particularly during the Renaissance and the Enlightenment epochs, was,

in essence, an exploitative culture seeking to substitute one exploitative social system (the feudal) by another (the capitalist). Modern European ideas are, in their social essence, exploitative ideas because they are expressions of the development of capitalism in its various stages, and they are stamped by the particular exploitative nature of the capitalist system.

The same verdict may be given on all the ancient and modern cultures of the world since exploitation has been the basis of human society from the downfall of the primitive commune until the victory of the socialist revolution.

The working class is the only class that seeks, in its overthrow of the capitalist system, to build a society in which no kind of exploitation of man by man exists. Scientific socialism which expresses the aims and ideas of the working class is the only ideology—and the sole basis for a culture—that does not have an exploitative nature and is, thus, separated and distinguished from all the other previous cultures and ideologies.

The same applies to literature, as a component of culture. Literatures of the previous epochs could never become permanent models to be followed and imitated in the socialist epoch. The exploitative content of the old literature must be completely rejected, although its artistic forms and styles could be utilized in the service of creating new contents.

European realistic literature, for example, which rose during the Renaissance and made big advances in the 18th century reaching the summit in the critical realism of the 19th century—this literature, in its three principal periods of development, is the reflection of the rise and formation of the European capitalist system as it reached the stage of total domination and started, due to its own internal contradictions, to decline and fall. In essence, this literature is the product of bourgeois writers who participated, in one form or another, in the formation and the consolidation of the capitalist system. Even critical realism, the height of this kind of bourgeois literature, by failing to draw the correct conclusions from its critique of the system, served eventually to re-affirm the permanence of the system. Realism, as a technique, may, however, be kept together with romanticism, the other highly successful form of bourgeois 19th century literature, as long as they are used in the creation of a new socialist content.

Just as scientific socialism is the only ideology that seeks to put an end to all kinds of exploitation, so is socialist realist literature, in fact, the only literature that seeks to reflect the new reality and to propagate the new ideas and is, thus, distinguished from all the previous literatures.

Socialist realism in literature did not arise and did not develop in a tranquil way. Like scientific socialism, as a philosophy and an ideology, it advanced and developed in the midst of struggle. On the literary front, the

struggle has always been of a dual nature: fighting the reactionary literary trends on one side and struggling against the pseudo-socialist literary trends on the other.

The first epoch of the new literature may be limited by the years 1848 and 1905, characterized by the appearance of proletarian literature for the first time in Europe. This literature was the literature that accompanied working class movements, such as Chartism in Britain and other European working class movements in the middle of the 19th century as well as the literary products that surrounded the events of the Paris commune.

It is known that the working class movements of this epoch, in spite of their heroic deeds, were characterized by spontaneity and did not succeed in making scientific socialism their theoretical guide. The literature that accompanied these political movements and was a true expression of them was not a fully developed proletarian literature. It was rather a few scattered products that could not quantitatively face the existing bourgeois literature. In addition, the working class in that period had not reached the cultural level that would enable it to produce a large number of writers who could participate in drawing its life and struggle and in creating its own particular literature. Culture, in that period, was nearly monopolized by the bourgeoisie, and the vast majority of the writers were in its service.

Under those circumstances, it was inevitable that Marx and Engels would write at some length about the bourgeois authors of the time like Balzac, Schiller and others. They also utilized the whole range of European and non-European literature in the formation and elucidation of their social and philosophic theory. Although they never wrote a separate work on literature, their scattered comments must be taken as the first step in the development of a socialist literary theory.

Furthermore, Marx and Engels did not live in a socialist society and did not witness a socialist revolution. They never failed, however, to emphasize the key characteristic of socialism, namely its break with the systems and ideas of exploitation. "The communist revolution," they explained in the Manifesto of 1848, "is the most radical rupture with traditional property relations; no wonder that its development involves the most radical rupture with traditional ideas." The significance of this 'radical rupture' for literature was very clearly perceived by Marx. For this reason he predicted that the working class, when it came to creating its own literature, would draw its inspiration not from the past cultural tradition like the bourgeoisie, but from its own vision of the future. "Earlier revolutions," he said, "required recollections of past world history in order to drug themselves concerning their own content. The socialist revolution on the other hand, "in order to arrive at its own content.... Must let the dead bury their dead."<sup>1</sup>