



Research Paper

Socialist Realism in Maxim Gorky's *the Mother of a Traitor*

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ABSTRACT

The early decades of 20th century witnessed radical changes such as Russian Revolution that emancipated the working class from the clutches of Tsarist rule in Russia and consequently established proletariat dictatorship. Aftermath of revolution brought about numerous socio-economic reforms followed by certain cultural and literary reforms as well. Socialist Realism was an influencing literary method originated from Marxist Philosophy which led to the remarkable changes on cultural and literary fronts in the newly-established socialist country. Though started in 1930s by Joseph Stalin in Russia, it included many writers not only from Russia but also from across the world. Maxim Gorky was said to be the vanguard of this literary movement. The writers who practiced this method produced substantially the first rate literary works that changed the face lift of the world. This paper attempts to explore the elements of Socialist Realism in Maxim Gorky's short story, *The Mother of a Traitor*. It inquires into the basic tenets of Socialist Realism with reference to the Marxist Literary Theory in the context of its initial developments at the wake of Russian Revolution. As a literary method and practice, Socialist Realism was very influential during the erstwhile socialist regime in Soviet Russia. This article delineates the way how Maxim Gorky unveils the realism in his works particularly in the short story, *The Mother of a Traitor*.

KEYWORDS: Socialist Realism, Bolshevik Spirit, Bolshevik Revolution, Social Consciousness, Marxist Literary Practice.

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Alexi Maximovich Peshkov is a gifted writer of Russia whose name is often equated with famous literary figures of the world i.e., Leo Tolstoy, Fyodor Dostoevsky, Anton Chekov, Edgar Allen Poe, O. Henry etcetera. He started writing under the pseudonym of *Maxim Gorky* by which he is popularly known to the world particularly to those who understand and analyse phenomenon of the world through the yard stick of Marxist world view. 'Bitter' was the assertion behind his pen-name 'Gorky' that threw light on his understanding and experience of the social world. He is the writer of higher order and was nominated five times for the award of Nobel Prize but in vein! Born on 28th March 1868, Gorky rose to the greater heights as a writer with enormous calibre in the portrayal of human nature. Before becoming a writer, he happened to roam like a tramp throughout the Tsarist regime in Russia, changing many jobs he collected a bounty of 'bitter' experiences, nurturing the true meaning of human life which provided him with objective resources for all the literary works he would produce in his later part of life. Apart from many seminal works, he penned such great works of literature as *The Mother* (1906), *My Childhood* (1913-1914), and *Summer Folk* (1904) which enjoyed a wide readership across the world. He was a close associate of stalwart literary giants like Tolstoy and Chekov. His name still echoes in the academics of literature as the founder of a literary method, Socialist Realism.

Socialist Realism is an artistic and literary method and theory indoctrinated by Soviet Russia to propagate positive and pro-revolutionary ideals regarding newly-born successful socialist revolution. Gorky was the principal founder of the literary method in which it was made compulsory practice for the writers to portray positive images of revolution in the art and literature. The sole criterion behind the method or theory was to create 'A New Russian Man' or 'A New Russian Woman' (Wikipedia) as envisaged by V.I. Lenin, the first chairman of Russian Communist Party. This method romanticizes the Bolshevik Spirit on heightening and idealizing planes of the heroes to build a social atmosphere suitable for revolution. At the turn of twentieth century the literary world witnessed many new trends and methods coming into literature and art, *modernism* and *symbolism* being a few of them. On the contrary, Socialist Realism echoed in Soviet Russia with its quite a new and prototypical literary tradition. The writers of this method passionately sang the songs of socialist

revolution which Alexander Gerasimov defines it, “Realistic in form, Socialistic in content” (Wikipedia). Gorky was the vanguard of this method of literature because he headed the association of Russian writers for many years. He himself says that Socialist Realism practices the theory to portray the importance of social activities that shape and prepare humans towards socialist revolution. Certain works of Maxim Gorky particularly the short stories vividly mirror the ground realities of the contemporary social contexts in Soviet Russia through positive perspectives. It is a method in which optimistic folds human nature is opened up as part of its educational role to be brought about in terms of social transformation; Gorky's short story is not an exception this tendency.

Socialist Realism was a recurrent theme and method in art and literature for a long period in Soviet Russia and Gorky's works were not exclusive of this trend. His seminal novel, *The Mother (1906)* excitedly paints mundane life of a mother, Pelageya Nivlona Vlasova, a labourer in a factory in Tsar Regime and her beloved son, Pavel Vlasov. In this novel, Gorky articulates the miserable conditions in Tsarist Russia on one hand and revolutionary agitation in the making towards socialist revolution, a social transformation on the other hand. In fact these revolutionary aspirations had been conceived in the eighteenth century by Karl Marx, the most celebrated German philosopher of this millennium. At the turn of twentieth century, in continuation of Marxism, V.I. Lenin, later Joseph Stalin and others carried forward the socialist movement in the world and in Russia particularly. In this historical process, after the realisation of Bolshevik Revolution, the Soviet Union made Socialist Realism a compulsory literary practice by mandating Marxist Aesthetics as a philosophical foundation. A cult of writers fervidly and indiscriminately employed this method to celebrate fruitful revolution and Gorky headed the pool of these ink slingers. Almost all of his works specifically his short stories depict the life and experience of the proletariat, to prepare them to the alternative social model which is altogether a new practice and trend in the world literature. His works elegantly conveyed ‘assured loyalty’ to the ‘Party-Line’ which Lenin calls it ‘Party Mindedness’ (Wikipedia). Narration of socialist ideals is also one of the significant insights of this method that includes all the human values namely truthfulness, kindness, generosity and social life over an individuality.

The Mother of a Traitor is a poignant narrative about a widowed-mother, interwoven on the backdrop of dark and gloomy war circumstances foreshadowing the double tragedy with which the story concludes. It reveals the gloomy condition of a mother who is caught by the irony of love for her son and hatred for treachery or between two kinds of love, one for her son and the other for her town, the two often being in conflict with each other and latter surpassing the earlier. A widowed-mother, Monna Marianna lives in a far-off town the demographic details of which are not provided, but seemingly a European town struck in the captivity of enemies' army. Lonely as a single widowed-mother, she raises her only son by trying to inculcate the human values but fails to succeed. To her utmost sadness and dissatisfaction, the grown up-son turns out to be the commander of an army of foes. Now that the camp of the army set up on the hillocks around and captivates the town, the heads and citizens of the town know that the captain of enemies is none other than the son of Monna Marianna. The nights become nightmarish for it is easy to be slaughtered and so no one in the town lights the lamps for it makes houses visible to the foes-the nights are really pathetic for them. Being a socially conscious woman with Bolshevik spirit, the mother comes out of home at midnight and requests the elders of the town to grant her permission by opening gates of the town to reach her son or kill her for the blunder committed by her son, the captain of foes. After a little discussion, the elders of the town open the gates to let her go to her son on the hillocks. Eventually, the mother treks the mountains passing through the pathways strewn amid by the fleshy and bony carcasses and corpses. Finally, mother reaches her son and is welcomed warmly by his soldiers. She makes deliberations with her son for ceasefire in support of the town but fails to convince him.

The mother being a woman of socially upward mobility tries to convince her son in all her negotiations for ceasefire and thus she takes the side of citizens of town for she thinks social life is inevitably the first priority of all humans. And she tries her mettle, but fails in arriving at a consensus with her son. As the one and only way to emancipate the town, she involves her son into her soothing narratives by creating a verbal stupor and then stabs with a knife into his heart and thereby stabs herself with the very knife into her heart for it is easy to locate aching heart with the loss of her beloved son. With the purposeful murder of her son and her consequent suicide, mother stands at the zenith of social consciousness becoming an icon of sacrificing lives of entire family for a social cause.

Gorky with utmost dexterity recounts the socio-cultural temperaments in the story which strengthen the elements of Socialist Realism; the captivation of the town, creating vandalism and destruction, stopping water supply by filling the streams with corpses, burning down vineyards, tramping down the fields and cutting down trees in the neighbourhood account for description of Socialist Realism. Gorky delineates thus, “The enemy had thrown corpses into the all streams that fed water to the city, they had burned down the vineyards around the walls, trampled the fields, cut down the orchards-the city was now exposed on all sides, and nearly every day the cannon and muskets of the enemy showed it with lead and iron” (Gorky 243) Thus the stern reality of the war is

verbalised into a story which creates life-like contexts among the readers and this type of narration inspired the common Russians in millions to take part in the construction of post-revolutionary activities.

Gorky skilfully gives an account of the pathetic condition of town by various agonies, sufferings of common man struck in the terror of the war. He further alleges, though not in direct terms, the war always targets the proletariat or working class and it is the sole creation of capitalism making profits for itself. In the method of *Socialist Realism*, the writers become teachers awakening the common people about the dangers of exploitation prevalent in the society and inspire them towards the realization of democratic revolution. In this process the writers just articulate the social conditions from the ground realities. Gorky further narrates:

Worst of all were the nights; in the nocturnal stillness the groans and cries were more distinctly audible; black shadows crept stealthily from the gorges of the distant mountains towards the half-demolished walls, hiding the enemy camp from view, and over the black ridges of the mountains rose the moon like a lost shield dented by sword blows. (Gorky 243)

Another element of *Socialist Realism* is evident when the mother is extolled as hero in the story is completely different from the earlier practices in literature and art. Generally in stereo-typical literature and art, women and mothers are portrayed as passive persons bringing up children in houses. The conventional literature depicts women as caretakers of children and home but not as warriors. Gorky's portrayal of women is the other way round! The mother in the story saves all the people of town by stabbing her son and later by herself proving that a woman can do anything if her sentiments are hurt! This unconventional portrayal of women against to the established norms in literature becomes possible in *Socialist Realism* which promotes social consciousness and collectivism over individualism and it is the core principle of Marxist aesthetics. Gorky aptly asserts, "A mother creates, she protects, and to speak to her of destruction means to speak against her; but he did not know this, he did not know that he was negating her reason for existence." (Gorky 247) He further says, "Nor did he know that Mother can be as clever and ruthless as she is fearless, when life she creates and cherishes is in question." (Gorky 247)

Socialist Realism, in all its efforts paves the way clear to create or prepare "A New Soviet Man" as envisaged by Lenin, the Vanguard of Russian Socialist Revolution. In the same way, Gorky created a completely a "New Soviet Woman", Monna Marianna. She is a transformed woman because of courage she exhibits in her commitment towards a social cause. She takes completely u-turn in an unconventional way and kills the most beloved son which was not a trend in traditional portrayal of woman. The traditional portrayals of woman always show that woman try to save her children even when her children commit blunders that hinder the interests of society. Gorky transforms Monna Marianna into a "New Soviet Woman" by preparing her to perform the courageous task of saving her society at the cost of her life and her son's for he has been the foe to all the citizens of the town.

Gorky's painful projection of Monna Marianna in the story mirrors the stern reality in which woman of her example eek out their lives in factories with long hours of work. Her condition as a single, widowed-woman is an irrefutable fact quite evident across the Tsarist Russia. But the social consciousness and selfless collectivism she displays to save the town from the clutches of enemies proves her militancy and aspiration towards the revolution as it is mentioned impliedly in the narrative. All these are integral aspects of Socialist Realism. Gorky's fascinating narration goes on to show collectivism, a vital embodiment of Socialist Realism, "My son has come to be your enemy. Either kill me or open the gates that I may go to him...They replied: You are a human being, and your country must be precious to you; your son is as much an enemy to you as to each one of us." (Gorky 245)

The positive orientation of town elders towards mother is worth noticeable here. The elders of the town are under the impression that mother is quite innocent in the whole matter and they consider the mother a patriot of the town. Therefore they are more sympathetic towards her condition with regard to the loss of son from her hands. Gorky's depiction of positivist and pro-revolutionary orientations of elders of the town is remarkable anecdote of Socialist Realism embedded in the narrative because, as already is mentioned, honesty, truthfulness, kindness and generosity are the pivotal features of Socialist Realism. Here, Gorky creates positive images of revolution through the reflections of traumatic experience of the people of the town who play an important role in social transformation. He aptly narrates thus:

It would not be honourable to kill you for the sins of your son. We know that you could not have led him to commit this terrible sin, and we can understand your distress. But the city does not need you even as a hostage; your son cares naught for you, we believe that he has forgotten you, fiend that he is, and there is your punishment if you think you have deserved it! We believe that is more terrible than death itself. (Gorky 245)

The narrative reveals that how youngsters should be brought up in the dynamics of social change inculcating in them revolutionary aspirations. Somehow, though not clearly mentioned in the narrative, the mother fails to teach her son the core principles of humanity that results in the final catharsis of the story; mother kills her son. This event professes that moral upbringing of youngsters is instrumental in the process of social transformation. Son's joining with enemy's camp was the major turn in the whole plot of story that emphasizes

the cordial relationship between Monna Marianna and her son has become disastrous threat not only to her family but also to the whole humanity of the town. In contrast to this, Gorky projects the protagonist Pavel Vlasov as a militant in the revolutionary movement in his seminal novel, *The Mother*. The delineation of these two characters, one as anti-revolutionary and the other pro-revolutionary goes hand in hand in different directions but meet at the final analysis of poetic justice as these two narratives stand for revolutionary cause, through Socialist Realism. Apart from many of his novels and short stories, his theoretical prose (Literary Essays) contributes to Marxist Literary Theory and Practice particularly Socialist Realism.

Gorky passionately expounds the role of woman in the dynamics social transformation in terms of Socialist Realism by emphasizing, "A mother creates, she protects, and to speak to her of destruction means to speak against her" (Gorky 247). He glorifies the role of woman as selfless 'New Soviet Woman' and profoundly depicts her as hero harbingering the Socialist Revolution facing against all kinds of odds in middle. He romanticizes the Socialist dream of revolution with special reference to the role of women by encouraging certain heightening and revolutionary consciousness of proletariat and working class at the lower stratum of the society. His realistic portrayal of Monna Marianna in the story reveals his optimistic views and greater adherence to Socialist Realism. However, '*The Mother of a Traitor*' remains as the most successful narrative of Socialist Realism with its poignant and fervid implication of emotions driven towards social transformation.

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