

A Marxist Approach to Analyse Agonies of Agnes in Douglas Stuart's *Shuggie Bain*

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Abstract: This paper examines how Douglas Stuart's *Shuggie Bain* is a novel presenting agonies of the eponymous character Shuggie and in particular his mother Agnes Bain; at the same time, it also portrays the poor and miserable socio-economic status of Glasgow, Scotland. Social conditions and personal conditions have been shown in a parallel manner. Stuart has presented the 1980s economically degraded Glasgow society under Thatcherism. The economic condition of people has put impact on their social life and they have become addicted to alcohol and young generation are mostly affected by it. They are involved in anti-social activities. Young life is on the verge of destruction. The paper adopts Marx's theory which is based on the assumption that economic condition of a person decides the future and present of an individual. Here, the protagonist Agnes and her son Shuggie Bain are the victims of such a society. Their economic condition ultimately lands them in a miserable condition. A normal not so happy life of Agnes takes a lot of turn only because of her high aspiration and adverse economic condition of both the nations and in her personal life.

Keywords: Marxism, hegemony, ideology, economy, base, superstructure, culture, society.

Douglas Stuart is a name which appeared in the limelight of literary world all of a sudden in the year 2018 with the publication of his debut novel *Shuggie Bain*. It brought him immense glory when in 2020 he got the prestigious Booker prize for his heart-breaking story. It was the result of his ten years effort. He wrote this novel to

recollect his childhood days as mentioned by him in an interview with Colm Tobin. He terms it a love story, some others call it a *Bildungsroman*, and some others call it a gay novel. It is also reviewed as a novel of agonies of 1980s Scotland -riven by unemployment, industries like shipbuilding, mining and ironworking whose affect was growing alcoholism, infidelity and the daily struggle of poverty in a Thatcherite Scotland. Daily Telegraph also observed it as a transcendent portrait of alcoholism, poverty and desperate filial love. The Times of India calls it a novel which explores the theme of love, courage and addiction.

The novel opens with the struggle of the sixteen year old Shuggie Bain with poverty and taking care of his alcoholic mother Agnes who is abandoned by his half-brother Leek, half-sister Catherine and his father Big Shug. The 1980s Glasgowian economy is shown in a parallel way in the life of Agnes who is left alone with her three children by her philandering husband. She dreams of all fine, big, shiny things in life but her unfulfilled desires put her deep in the cycle of alcohol addiction. When everybody abandons her Shuggie, her son stays with her till her last breath. She is the person responsible for her own misery which will be explained by a Marxist approach to her life. It is ideology both individual and of the state which determines the fate and future.

All characters have their own ideology which governs their personal life. Like that a state has its own. Althusser is talking about the ideology which is circulated through particular structure in the society which he terms as 'ideological state apparatuses' (Nair 134). Hence, state imposes ideology through the threat of sanctioned violence in the form of police, law, and army. As a result, people accept cultural norms and habits because of the fear of state retaliation. It was the Thatcherite Govt. which made the condition of people very miserable.

Thatcher didn't want honest workers anymore; her future was technology and nuclear power and private health. Industrial days were over, and the bones of the Clyde Shipworks and the Springburn Railworks lay about the city like rotten dinosaurs.

Whole housing estates of young men who were promised the working trades of their fathers had no future now. Men were losing their very masculinity. (43)

Under Thatcherism coal miners and other labourers, traders became forgotten as people who had exited for jobs elsewhere. After an irrational decision of the Govt. people started feeling homeless as if they do not belong to the state. The same has been shown in a parallel manner in Agnes's life. She may be taken as a symbol of suppressed society whose social backbone has weakened due to its economic condition. Soon she took the wrong decision of marrying Big Shug against the will of her mother she started feeling a seclusion, "Several times she left small piles of the children's clothes near them and then watched with bubbling jealousy as the cases up and moved to the other side of the room, still with nothing belonging to her or the children placed inside." (81)

In the novel Staurt has projected condition of others also in a realistic manner. Very limited job opportunities left for people. Young boys who aspired to take up their fathers' trade are now jobless and started plundering people and taking their lives.

It's no Butlin's, but that sounds like the good auld days. That mine has been dying for years. There's hardly nae work there for naeboddy anymair. Every year we've got mair men sat at home, wanking in the daylight. (113)

Unemployment, bad social housing in isolated areas with limited transport and scarcity of standard services like health, transport and entertainment made the situation worse. Many children like Shuggie Bain lead a very miserable life due to poverty. Some earned bad reputation of being thief. Elders became alcoholic. Agnes is such an example. For many years in Glasgow the council-built housing estates at four points of the compass peripheries of the city boundary places like Castelmilk in the South, Easter house in East, Drumchapel in the west and Sighthill in the North were places that

develop a dubious reputation for unemployment and crime. In one episode Catherine is surrounded by a group of boys who were trying to molest her in Sight Hill area.

The men standing around her were only boys, younger than her and probably younger than Leek. They had been smoking and waiting in the dark. With no peace at home they are waiting for someone to molest or for a chance to knife the night watchman. (62)

There was not only increase in crime rate but also quality of life of people was also deteriorating. Workers are commodified who in reality are full human beings, merely treated as products bought and sold on the market. This “commoditization” (Heyman 2) then extends across nature, consumption, culture, and so forth. Capitalists monopolize the productive resources and at the same time they require workers to turn those resources into products. Although they are provided with wage but the final product is more valuable than the wages and other inputs. In this novel there are instances where workers are working for twenty-five years and getting salary of three weeks. There is the reference of dead dog in Sighthill. It reminds the struggle of people who in autocrat rule are brutally, ruthlessly suppressed.

Someone had been rat poisoning all the Sighthill strays; they had thought that kinder than watching them writhe in heat. (60)

In the Glasgow the housing scheme left the poor in a bad condition. So, house structure of rich people was the aspiration of poor. Agnes too wanted a house of her own, with her own front gate and garden. A house of her own which could restore her pride. Concept of such a house was like a happy little village and a real sort of place where everybody knows everybody else. But this dream was also not fulfilled till the end of her life. In the beginning when the novel opens, we find Shuggie living in a very small room

in Mr. Bakhsh's boarding house who turned the kitchenette into a bedroom.

Shuggie supposed at one time the room must have been the living room of a fairly grand three-bedroom flat. He had seen into some of the other rooms in the house. The kitchenette Mrs Bakhsh had turned into a bedroom still had its original checkered linoleum floor, and the three other boxier rooms still kept their original threadbare carpets. (8)

Apart from this condition of the house Shuggie was living alone without any elder to take care of him. But it was normal for Mrs Bakhsh who cared for her rent. All these miserable conditions seemed very normal to people.

In Marxism social and cultural life of an individual is determined by the economic condition. Hence economy is the base which and the cultural aspect forms the superstructure. On the basis of this Base and Superstructure model miseries in the life of Agnes could be understood. The economic condition of 1980s Glasgow was under Michael Thatcher for which economic depression started. This situation brought with it agonies in the life of people. Agnes is born poor but for an optimistic father aspires for a rich life. She is also bestowed with a glamorous face who is often compared to actress Elizabeth Taylor and hopes for a rich life after marriage. Her dream is shattered with her first marriage to Brendan McGowan. Although he was responsible and hard working husband still Agnes wanted more and in search of a more better and luxurious life she left him and marries Big Shug.

She could not bring back her step. So, she suffered with Shug. When he left her alone in order to earn livelihood, she works in a fuel station at night. There she again gives her life a chance and develops friendship with a taxi driver named Eugene in the hope of a good life. She starts dreaming a luxurious life with the company of Eugene.

It was Eugene who showed her a luxurious life and dragged her again to alcoholism which she left for one year. He first took her to Grand Ole Opry. She felt it like a fancy premier.

Agnes had never been to the Grand Ole Opry before... couples went for the country-music nights, with line dancing and gunslinging matches... The Opry's old Western sign lit up the street & shone off the wet tarmac. People jostled at the door to get in, and Agnes had the impression of being at a fancy premier. (240-41)

Her daydream with Eugene takes new form. She thought he is the one who could help her to remove emptiness in life. He could be a friend, a lover, a father. He could give her money and they could spend their holidays together; he could buy her messages in a big trolley from a big, branded supermarket.

In one episode Eugene took her to golfer's hotel which is not accessible when she was living in such poor condition. She was charmed by its dining room. When she entered it pride rose in her. It was temporary. When this dream shattered and she met with the realities of life and her own economic condition she became alcoholic and met her catastrophic end. Such became the dream of her daughter. Catherine follows her husband to South Africa for financial gain.

Aspiration to lead a life somebody else is leading is primarily responsible for personal agony. Again, to follow suit may land a person in another difficult situation. Such is the philosophy of Gramsci. He developed the concept of hegemony in the *Prison Writings*. The key idea of hegemony is man is not ruled by force but by ideas. It is the cultural, moral and ideological leadership of bourgeoisie over subaltern groups. It is based on the equilibrium between consent and coercion. The bourgeoisie was hegemonic because it protected some interests of the subaltern classes in order to suppress any sort of revolution. They will concern themselves with private matters and do not question the fundamental source of their present socio-economic condition. They believe and accept it

as natural. The term *hegemon* is used to identify the actor, group, class, or state that exercises hegemonic power or that is responsible for the dissemination of hegemonic ideas.

In the poor economic Scottish society, Agnes, although, was born poor but brought up by her ambitious father under the shade of an upper-class culture. It is the upper class who define quality and from quality taste, manner and aesthetics class emerges. Class is a subject to status and power and only they can define what is good or bad. The notion of class and culture was first implanted in the mind of Agnes since she was a child. Irrespective of her working-class background her father wanted her to look 'neat as a new pin' (74).

Once Lizzie, mother of Agnes was taken to Kelvingrove Hall, a grand place by her husband Wullie. The place was fully crowded. While Lizzie was feeling ashamed of in that place Wullie acted, "like he had the same right to be there as any doctor from the Byres Road" (189). From this statement it can be stated that Wullie is influenced by the hegemon of the upper class. Hegemony was a form of control exercised primarily through a society's *superstructure*, as opposed to its *base* or social relations of production of a predominately economic character. Instead of blaming the poor economic policy of the then Govt. he accepts it and thinks there is nothing wrong in imitating an upper-class life.

According to Pierre Bourdieu competition between classes is not always for material benefits. Sometimes it is directed towards acquiring symbolic capital and cultural capital. Symbolic capital is the accumulated prestige, honour and recognition based on one's own acquired knowledge or expertise. So sometimes it generates violence by those who possess it more against those who possess less.

Cultural capital is cultural knowledge which enables and empowers an individual to appreciate cultural practices. It is acquired from family or institution. It helps individual to set 'taste' and this taste sets the upper class above the lower class. It becomes a marker of social rank. Very important to mention here is cultural capital can be exchanged for economic gain.

In case of Agnes her aspiration of a rich house and a life style because of her acquired habitus; she considers herself superior to all. She had a good make-up sense, good choice of clothing which gave her an aristocratic look and women in her neighbourhood were jealous of her. But this unfulfilled aspiration ultimately left her in a state of alienation.

In the class struggle the rich always exploit the poor and the result of this exploitation is alienation. Due to this human relationship appears as a set of relationship between things which ends up when its utility gets over. Agnes is left alone and leads an alienated life because she had no financial power in her hand. She had to depend upon her two children from her first husband Leek and Catherine

Proust grasps a 'truth' about alienation of the individual in modern society where alienation is part of an objective social reality. Marx is talking about two kinds of alienation Political and Economic. In political alienation the state does not care about individual's existence. To Marx one should get rid of economic alienation to get rid of political alienation. If the state is out of this procedure, it will be termed as the state of being alienated. Due to this man becomes merely the existence of material human being. When Agnes's first husband could not fulfil her demand, he is left alone. When her children found that they cannot get any financial help from her rather she became a financial burden upon Leek and Catherine. Hence, Catherine leaves her alone and went to Africa with her husband for financial gain and does not return even on her death.

According to Erich Fromm, alienation is the result of capitalist society which disturbs the feeling of man and factors responsible for alienation are subject to the influence of social condition on human existence. In the view of Fromm self-alienation is absence of self awareness or a complete loss of it. He considers self-alienation pertaining to feeling. He writes in his book *Sane Society* that "In Marx's system alienation is called that condition of man where his own act becomes to him an alien power, standing over and against him, instead of being ruled by him." When the life of Agnes will be examined closely it is only, she and her decision

which determine her fate. An alienated man necessarily becomes alienated from society because the identity of self-alienation and the situation of the lack of or loss of self-awareness necessarily alienate him from society. She is viewed different from all in the society where she lives. She is hardly visited by women in the society.

This novel is a superb portrayal of economic condition of the society in relation to the miserable life of characters. Thatcher's economic policies affected the working class, who lost their jobs in heavy industry, and how they became victim of the brutality and inhumanity of capitalism. Agnes's and Shuggie's life journey shows social conditions determine their personal life style.

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