



## Locating O. Henry's *The Gift of the Magi* in the Framework of Marxism

Dr. Dadasaheb Salunke

Associate Professor, Department of English,  
Shri Muktanand College, Gangapur, Dist. Ch. Sambhajinagar, Maharashtra d77salunke@gmail.com

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**ABSTRACT:** Reading a literary text from the Marxist point of view provides a space for understanding the dominant socio-economic forces, class struggle and material condition of the contemporary era. Interpretation of O. Henry's *The Gift of the Magi* explores the impact of economic inequalities and its impact on the human relationships. It dwells on the life of a working class couple, Della and Jim, who live in New York which is a symbol of capitalism. The story also serves as a commentary on the commodification of love in the modern urban world. Their struggle represents the struggle of the proletariat who find it difficult to make both ends meet. The story elaborates the false consciousness and consumerism that Della and Jim are subject to.

**KEYWORDS:** socio-economic, inequalities, capitalism, proletariat, commodification etc.

### I. WHAT IS MARXISM?

The German philosopher Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels developed the ideology of Marxism that emphasises the concepts like historical materialism and class struggle through their seminal work *The Communist Manifesto*. Merriam Webster Dictionary defines Marxism as 'the political, economic, and social principles and policies advocated by Marx especially : a theory and practice of socialism including the labor theory of value, dialectical materialism, the class struggle, and dictatorship of the proletariat until the establishment of a classless society.' ("Marxism," def 1.a)

The Marxist ideology holds that there are two sections in every society: Bourgeoisie and the Proletariat. The ideology also says that a handful of the Bourgeoisie (Ruling/Capitalist Class) which owns the means of production while a large number of masses Proletariat (working class/labour) work for them. In such a system the rich exploit the poor. The working class live in a false consciousness. The much awaited class consciousness is absent in this kind of social system. In a modern industrial world of mass

production, the exploitation of the working class happens due to the economic inequality.

Capitalism creates two classes in society- the wealthy class or the bourgeoisie and labor class or the proletariat. The wealthy class owns all means of production and property, whereas the labor class actually works for producing goods and services. (Kulkarni 17)

### II. LOCATING *THE GIFT OF THE MAGI* IN THE FRAMEWORK OF MARXISM

This is one of O. Henry's important short stories. It contains Marxist elements. For the present analysis, the paper elaborates on the concepts like financial constraints, description of the house, mirror of the contemporary society, commodification of love, class relations, false consciousness etc.

### III. FINANCIAL CONSTRAINTS

Della and Jim are the protagonists. The story opens with a strong glimpse of Marxism. The next day being Christmas, Della wanted to buy a gift for her husband. So she counted the savings. That she counted it for three times, is more relevant. She had saved one dollar and eighty seven cents despite her consistent savings habit for the last few months. She had her saving in dollar and pennies. She could save this much by haggling with the grocer, vegetable and the butcherman. This is a pretty meagre sum to buy a decent gift for her husband. She was very upset due to the lack of money. Jim needed a new overcoat and he had no gloves too. He was twenty two years old. He looked thin and serious. He had to carry on the burden of the family. From the story we come to know that only Jim is employed while Della is a housewife.

'One dollar and eighty-seven cents. That was all. And sixty cents of it was in pennies. Pennies saved one and two at a time by bulldozing the grocer and the vegetable man and the butcher until one's cheeks burned with the silent imputation of parsimony that such close dealing implied' (Smith 149)

The story brings forth the working class mentality. Della had a lot of leisure. She failed to know the value



of time. On the contrary the rich people know that time is very valuable. The rich knows time management. As soon as she sold her hair to Mme Saffronie, she wandered through the market. Della spent a lot time visiting stores searching for a suitable gift. It is to be noted that while at home she spent her time in brooding over the sorry state of their economy.

‘Oh, and the next two hours tripped by on rosy wings. Forget the hashed metaphor. She was ransacking the stores for Jim’s present.’ (Smith 152)

At the same time the rich are generally very frugal and lead a simple life. On the contrary, Della appeared frugal at times but very extravagant when it came to buy a Christmas gift. She spent all her saving for the gift. In fact the platinum chain had no special utility value. They had other priorities as well.

‘Many a happy hour she had spent planning for something nice for him. Something fine and rare and sterling - something just a little bit near to being worthy of the honour of being owned by Jim.’ (Smith 150)

#### **IV. DESCRIPTION OF THE HOUSE**

Della and Jim lived in a flat in New York. The description of their house indicates that their’s was a typical working class family. They always faced financial constraints. From Della’s mouth we come to know that it was not like a beggar’s house. They paid eight dollars per week in rent. The electric bell did not work. There is ‘a shabby little coach’ in their flat. In the past, Jim had a modest income of thirty dollars per week. But now the income had shrunk to twenty dollars per week. This shows their humble background. The family expenses were more than what Jim earned. So it was difficult for them to manage the family. The description of the looking-glass summarizes the economic condition of the family.

‘There was a looking-glass between the windows of the room. Perhaps you have seen the kind of looking-glass that is placed in \$8 furnished rooms. It was very narrow. A person could see only a little of himself at a time. However, if he was very thin and moved very quickly, he might be able to get a good view of himself. Della, being quite thin, had mastered this art.’ (Smith 150)

#### **V. MIRROR OF THE CONTEMPORARY SOCIETY**

The story mirrors the life of New York in the first decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. It was a capitalist society. But there lived working class people like Della and Jim. The story depicts the struggle of the couple under the pressure of capitalism. The wealthy

residents lead a luxurious life and have all facilities at their disposal. On the other hand the people like Jim and Della who worked hard but still face financial crunch. Despite their hard work the working class could not afford to live a comfortable life. Their life was full of sufferings.

‘So Della did it. Which instigates the moral reflectin that life is made up of sobs, sniffles and smiles, with sniffles predominating.’ (Smith 150)

This story was published in 1906. According to Marxist theory, the economic resources form the ‘base’ while literature forms the ‘superstructure’. Literature is the product of the material condition of the era in which it is produced. In this respect, the story has some autobiographical elements. There is a great deal of similarity between the lives of Jim and O. Henry too. The author himself had earned a handsome income earlier but later had charges of fraud while working in a bank. He had experienced financial crisis in his life. He was imprisoned on account of the charges of financial irregularity in his professional life.

‘The working class is often caught in a cycle of poverty and exploitation. Their hard work is undervalued, and their lives are subject to the unpredictable forces of the economy. Moreover, the story wisely reveals the instability of the capitalist system and its crisis. Della and Jim’s poverty and struggles are direct consequences of the economy’s constant shifts.’ (Guyen 88)

O. Henry wants to suggest that the value of any person is judged on the basis of the wealth he has. That’s why Della’s view that Jim’s name on the name plate looks rather longer and only D. would be sufficient rather than full Dillingham. Della felt that since the Jim’s income has dropped to \$30 now, his name be shortened. This view is pretty suggestive. In the modern times, the social system tends to respect only the economically powerful people. The ordinary working class folk do not enjoy this kind of reception. ‘The “Dillingham” had been flung to the breeze during a former period of prosperity when its possessor was being paid \$30 per week. Now, when the income was shrunk to \$20, though, they were thinking seriously of contracting to a modest and unassuming D.’ (Smith 150)

#### **VI. COMMODIFICATION OF LOVE**

There are things in life that we cannot commodify. Love, beauty, bonding, labour, healthcare are things that we cannot commodify. However, in a capitalist system these emotions are used as commodities. There is emphasis on consumption and exchange. Under the capitalist influence, people view relationship as exchangeable



commodities rather than genuine relationships. We know that commodities are bought and sold in market as they have marketable value. Such relationship lack emotional depth and external appearance becomes more important.

‘Commodities are products or services created primarily for exchange or profit, and they are subject to the rules of supply and demand. When we speak of the commodification of love, we refer to the ways in which love has been repackaged as something that can be bought, sold, and traded in the marketplace.’ (Commodification of Love)

In order to please her Husband, Jim, Della sells her beautiful long hair for dollar twenty and buys a platinum fob chain as a Christmas gift. Here, love is commodified. The conversation between Della and Mme Saffronie demonstrate the Marxist idea of commodification of love.

“Will you buy my hair?” asked Della.

“I buy hair,” said Madame, “Take yer hat off and let’s have a sight at the looks of it.”

Down rippled the brown cascade.

“Twey dollars,” said Madame, lifting the mass with a practised hand.

“Give it to me quck” said Della. (Smith 151)

## VII. CLASS RELATIONS

The story also contains explicit references to the class relations prevalent in the contemporary society. The story is set in New York which is one of the richest cities in the world. The story depicts the life of a working class couple who earn just enough money to make both ends meet. The Queen of Sheba and King Solomon are metaphors of the Bourgeoisie while Della and Jim are that of the Proletariat. The story is set up in a place where the capitalist and the working class are engaged in a struggle. The rich are distinct from the poor because they own the means of production while the working class who live in a false consciousness aspire to be like their rich counterparts. In this story Della and Jim represent the working class while the Queen of Sheba and King Solomon represent the Bourgeoisie.

‘The other was Della’s hair. Had the queen of Sheba lived in the flat across the airshaft, Della would have let her hair hang out the window some day to dry just to depreciate Her Majesty’s jewels and gifts. Had King Solomon been the janitor, with all his treasures piled up in the basement, Jim would have pulled out his watch every time he passed, just to see him pluck at his beard from envy.’ (Smith 151)

## VIII. FALSE CONSCIOUSNESS

According to Marxism, the working class is subject to misaligned false consciousness. They assume that they will scale up and be like the capitalist in future. However, the capitalist system is designed in such a way that it only strengthens the capitalist ruling class and ignore the interests of the proletariat. So it is hardly possible for the working class people to upgrade their class. Here in this story, Della and Jim do not know the true nature of their social and economic position in the society. Della’s aspiration to imitate the lifestyle of the wealthy class is evident when she indulges in fashion. Hers is a false consciousness. This is opposite to class consciousness. She sells her hair for twenty dollar and buys a platinum fob chain for her husband. In the economic terms, this decision lacks reason. It was taken in an emotional state. She realizes it only when she reaches home. It is not a prudent decision to sell one’s hair for buying a gift for somebody. The writer describes it as ‘intoxication’. It was only when she settled down that she looked at her reflection in the mirror carefully and critically.

‘When Della reached home her intoxication gave way a little prudence and reason. She got out of the curling irons.’ (Smith 152)

The ruling class enjoy a life of ease and comfort. They have resources to buy most expensive commodities and services. However, the working class too secretly aspire to buy expensive commodities. They have desire to gratify their wish. They aspire for these commodities for years. Della wanted to buy a set of combs for her since many years. However, due to the financial constraints Jim could not buy it for her. They are expensive and hence out of their buying capacity.

‘For their lay The Combs-the set of combs, side and back, that Della had worshipped for long in Broadway window...They were expensive combs, she knew, and her heart had simply craved and yearned over them without the least hope of possession.’ (Smith 154)

## IX. CONCLUSIONS

O. Henry’s *The Gift of the Magi* provides scope for Marxist analysis. Jim and Della represent a working class family living in New York. It is a story of exploitation of the proletariat bourgeoisie in a capitalist society. The couple faces financial constraints and the crunch is visible in the description of their house and their lifestyle. Applying the Marxist theory to this story we realize that the couple live in a false consciousness. The story highlights the commodification of love which is a characteristic of the Marxist theory. When we read the story from the



Marxist lens we understand the class relations in the contemporary American society.

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