

Base and Superstructure in Trevor Griffith's *Piano*

Jayalakshmi B

Assistant Professor of English, Govt. Home Science College Holenarasipura, Hassan- 573 211 Karnataka.

Abstract: Trevor Griffiths is a contemporary Marxist playwright in Britain. He has been writing plays for stage screen and cinema since 1969. He is well-known for his stage play *Comedians*. Some of his plays are adaptations by the famous writers such as D.H. Lawrence and Anton Chekhov. One of his important plays *Piano* takes its origin from Anton Chekhov's short stories. In this article the play *Piano* will be discussed in the light of Marxist perspective applying one of the significant Marxists concept of 'BASE AND SUPERSTRUCTURE'.

I. Introduction

The aim of this article is to examine the Marxist concept of 'base and superstructure' in Trevor Griffiths's *Piano*. It is interesting to note that Griffiths's plays are an emphasis of left-wing political ideas. Karl Marx wrote the enlightened political pamphlet *Communist manifesto* (1848), a significant milestone in the history of socialist circles with the idea: 'The history of all hitherto existing societies is the history of the class struggles'. (Marx and Engels 9) The quintessence of the Marxist ideas lies between the two fundamental hostile classes, "non-owning workers and non-working owners", (Britannica ready Reference Encyclopedia) since the society is fundamentally made up of antagonistic classes. This historical chasm between the emblematically extreme classes, Marx termed it 'alienation' a dangerous economic and social disorder. Subsequently, Erwin Piscator, the German director developed the theory of 'epic theatre' in 1924 which was primarily meant for political ideas and ideals. Thematically as well as structurally the stimulating movement aimed at the fundamental teaching of radical innovations as a method of Marxist intervention and succeeded in transforming the spectator's attitude from the passive voyeurism to a productive participation. As the first and best dramatist of this envisioned new theatre movement Bertolt Brecht, under the indispensable presence of Marxism coined the term 'Verfremdungseffekt' synonymous with 'alienation effect' or 'de-familiarization' effect in order to dismantle this disastrous doctrine, workers must have equal power over the means of production known as 'common ownership' which is a socialist birth right.

The architectural metaphor, 'base and superstructure' was first formulated by Marx and Engels in *German Ideology* (1846), in which they discussed the development of history and explored the pivotal role of the material existence in the society. Marx focused on the development of various kinds of ownership which existed over a period of time, such as: 'Tribal Ownership', Communal and State Ownership' and 'Feudal or Estate Property'. If 'Communal and State Ownership' resulted in slavery and class consciousness, 'Estate Property' gave rise to serfdom and landlordism. Eventually these serfs, who fled from the clutches of their masters' house, entered the towns and settled with their families working as day labourers. These labourers later came to be known as proletarians. At the same time the feudal society was encouraging the capitalism which led to the triumph of bourgeois. Further, Marx laid emphasis on the materialism as it was the prime cause for the division of labour. The tough struggle between the two hostile groups exists because the dominant class wants to protect the interests of its own class not only controlled the material production but also seized control of the consciousness of the workers. 'The ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch ruling ideas, i.e. the class which is the ruling material force of society, is at the same time its ruling intellectual force'. (6) The implementation was carried out systematically and imposed barbarously, its unjustifiable practices upon the economically and politically weaker sections of the society. In order to explore the confrontation between these extremes Marx enabled it through this metaphor of 'base and superstructure'. It was clearly explained in the Preface to *A Contribution to the critique of Political Economy* (1859). Marx defines:

In the social production of their existence, men enter into definite, necessary, relations, which are independent of their will, namely, relations of production corresponding to a determinate stage of development of their material forces production. The totality of these relations of production constitutes the economic structure of society, the real foundation on which there arises a legal and political superstructure and to which correspond definite forms of social consciousness. (Marx 4)

Hence, in Marxism the metaphorical relationship between 'Infrastructure and Superstructure' is quite inseparable and indeed it is the economic base that determines the development of cultural superstructure in a society. The 'base' consists of the 'forces of production' and 'the relations of production', whereas the 'superstructure' is an amalgamation of the ideological intuitions such as the state, religion, ethics, law, politics,

family, etc. In this context the exploitation of the dominant class is termed, in a way as ideology in Marxism. As Terry Eagleton observes its function 'is to legitimate the ruling class in society'. But it is worth to note that the materialist Marx clearly stated that every revolutionary movement originates at the base. The changes in economic foundations result in the gradual transformations of superstructure.

Griffiths was born into a Northern working class family in 1935, and he was one of the earliest beneficiaries of the 1944 Education Act in Britain. He was thoroughly radicalized by the political events of the 1968 along with David Hare, Howard Brenton, David Edgar, John McGrath and others who belonged to the 'second wave' of the British Post-war political theatre. He is well-known for his 'debate plays' both for stage and screen and his playwriting reflect his commitment to a socialist society. Being a political activist he identified with the left of the labour party. He used the theatre as a strong leftist intellectual platform in order to politicize, educate and liberate the working class masses. Griffiths is a 'post-'68' political product of Marx's socialist doctrine and he firmly believes in transformation of society from capitalism to socialism. After his entry into the British New Left he was thoroughly influenced by the works of Edward Thompson and Raymond Williams who shaped and strengthened his left-wing political ideas. His plays inspire, instruct and provoke the minds of audience by employing the strategies of ratiocination known as 'strategic penetration. In order to achieve this he deploys the Marxist technique of dialectics where he systematically explores the contradicting and confronting views of the characters in an argumentative mode. His ideological stances and his sense of duality make him stand out as a distinctive political playwright. He is one of those left leaning writers who felt the urgent need of revolutionary socialism in British society hence he believed: 'the future is clearly one of struggle, and absolutely unremitting commitment to that struggle'. (Itzin 174)

Arguably the plays of Trevor Griffiths are deeply embedded in the socio-cultural and political contexts. After watching the Russian film *Unfinished Piece for Mechanical Piano* (1980), which owes its material to Chekhov's play *Platonov* or *Fatherlessness* and other short stories like 'Peasants' and 'Three Years', Griffiths created his own piece of play *Piano* (1990). He is truly indebted to the Russian film-makers A. Adabashyan and N. Mikhikov. Griffiths' *Piano* deeply delves into the Marxist metaphor of 'base and superstructure'. The play is set in a Russian estate of Anna, a General's widow who has invited a group of aristocrats and neighboring land owners for the sake of recreation. These characters have involved in intertwining love stories with each other. The group represents Anna who still continues her passion towards Platonov and at the same time attracts her creditor's attention Shcherbuk. Platonov, a disappointed lover has entered into a loveless marriage with Shashenka but still adores his lover Sophia. In turn Sophia has married Sergie, Anna's stepson. The play also brings out some of the ridiculous characters like Triletski, a local doctor who gives more importance to the party than attending his patient. Shcherbuk, a neighboring landowner and also another creditor to Anna, behaves like a 'fascist' and proud of his 'blueblood'.

These characters have engaged in wistful ideals who look more 'like guests at a funeral'. The changing socio-political reformation is the prime cause for their disappointment and frustration in the play. At the same time Griffiths also pays much attention to the peasant characters that belong to the economic base. It is here the play *Piano* addresses the impact of transmogrification of aristocrats and peasants by exploiting the crucial idea of 'base and superstructure' from Marxist stand point. The opening scene of the play is one of the striking elements, which aptly introduces the peasants, the real 'base' of the society. The peasants are Radish, very old and matured whereas Zakhar, very young and dreamy. The piano was ordered from Moscow which was bought for an expensive price of two thousand roubles. The stage direction indicates that these two peasants are hauling a large 'Mechanical Piano' to Anna's estate but it is interesting to note that it was ordered by Petrin, a 'nouveau-riche' who was a son of former serf in the same estate. The "*Two men hump a large, heavy object wrapped in cowhide across a high narrow plank bridge. The work is hard, precarious; the men sweat, strain, their progress bruisingly slow*". (73)

Griffiths emphasizes the manual effort of these peasants while carrying it. The words such as 'hard', 'precarious', 'sweat', 'strain', etc. precisely register the workers' strenuous task required to carry the piano. Peasants also play a vital role in the 'productive forces'. It is further argued that the 'the man who distributes is also a productive worker'. Both Radish and Zakhar are also part of this 'productive work' involved in making that piano. Raymond Williams rightly asserts "the 'base' is the real social existence of man". (Williams, 33) While referring to Marx's essence of 'base and superstructure' Raymond Williams points out in his essay:

The man who makes a piano is a productive worker ... the man who distributes the piano is also a productive worker. Yet when it comes to the man who plays the piano, whether to himself or to others, there is no question he is not a productive worker at all. So piano-maker is base, but pianist superstructure. (Williams, 35)

However, the play is quite different in the sense, it does not manifest the above said idea, rather reinforces the possibility of turnaround that the 'piano-maker' can be a pianist or can afford it in future. The topsy-turvy of the socio-political changes witnesses these drastic changes. Anna assembles all her guests to unveil the expensive piano: Zakhar, the peasant stands before it and the 'surprise' is revealed later when she orders Zakhar to play the piano:

Zakhar!

The two men strip the hide from the object. The company stares at a brightly burnished mahogany upright piano. A handclap.

Chair!

Radish carries a garden chair, sets it down before the keyboard.

SHCHERBUK: A piano? Where's the surprise in a ...

ANNA: Sh. *(A handclap.)* Zakhar!

Zakhar looks at Radish, smiles palely, wipes his hands and feet, sits, lifts the lid, stares at the brilliant keys. Raises his hands above them.

Play!

Zakhar's hands go down, ... The terrace people watch as if tranced. (93)

All of them watch as if they are in 'trance'. Chekhov is one of the social realists of 20th century. He captured the modern drama with more life-like characters. He further attacked the traditional concept of drama where the plot always revolves around hero or heroine but he says each character in his play trying to become the center of attraction hence each character is important. This is how in real life each of us will be thinking of becoming something extraordinary. Hence he gives importance to all the characters in exploring their hidden unconscious. In the same way the present play where Griffiths adapts some of Chekhov's works begins and ends with the peasants and that shows their socio-political emancipation.

Carrying the piano and playing it is really a radical insertion of Griffiths into the play. It brings home the point that the scene is not just to examine his talent but to explore the potentiality of the farmers and it also denotes the cultural emancipation. With the revolutionary changes in the society the base becomes the superstructure. *Piano* depicts the class conflict between the aristocrats and the peasants. At the same time Griffiths throws much light on the disintegrating life of the aristocrats. The play is written at the backdrop of changing social structure of late nineteenth century Russia. The social and political transition results in the psychological breakdown of the aristocrats. Prior to the transition the same peasants were ideologically suppressed and violently oppressed by the 'repressive apparatus' under the Czarist administration. The inclusion of some radical peasants in the play is to amplify the political, social and psychological deterioration of the aristocrats. On the other hand the peasants represent 'the possibility of change' in a highly class conscious society. In the opening scene of the play Radish narrates a tale from 'his life', how as an honest painter and the son of a serf he was exploited in a capitalist society. It is not really 'a tale' but it is their real 'life' lived in that society, which is now on the threshold of a radical change. Zakhar admits that 'the Lord does not like the peasant'. But Radish is an optimist, who believes in the transformation and envisages:

RADISH: ... Some who believed the Lord God would come again amongst us to bring down the corrupt and the powerful. Still others who believed it was the peasants themselves who would rise up and smite the oppressor. *(Zakhar purses his lips, shakes his head.)* I learned reading there. And writing. And thinking.

ZAKHAR: All men think, Radish.

RADISH: All men have thoughts, maybe. Thinking's different. Thinking has to be learned. Like making bombs. And laying them. (74)

Piano is one such play, where Griffiths not only exemplifies the decadence of the aristocratic lifestyle but even strengthens the life of peasants to bring them to the mainstream of the society. When Zakhar was ordered to play the piano, Shcherbuk, a neighboring landowner was baffled to witness a peasant handling it. He shouts at him: "Hands off, brat. Never touch what isn't yours". (93) He undermines the peasants' potentiality in playing it. With aristocratic arrogance Shcherbuk is unable to accept the changing social structure. He represents the ruling class, which is incapable of embracing the economic base to the mainstream of superstructure. He says: "Trickery! I said a peasant couldn't do it, didn't I? It's beyond them. It's a machine, nothing more. (94) On the other hand the rise of the new social pressure groups led to the downfall of the Russian aristocracy that controlled more of Russia's wealth and political status. As a political playwright who belongs to the Marxist tradition he strongly extended his support to the resistance of working class: "... of all the classes that stand face to face with the bourgeoisie today, the proletariat alone is a really revolutionary class". (Marx and Engels p.48) The traditional role of the landlords eroded in the late-nineteenth century due to changes in social, political and legal amendments. This is what Griffiths calls the 'sense of breakdown and deadlock' among these aristocrats.

According to the Neo-Marxist Louis Althusser the superstructure functions in two ways: Repressive State Apparatus which includes prisons, laws, military and government. Ideological State Apparatus consists of religion, education, family, art, and culture. If RSA controls the society through the repressive violence, the ISA carries it through the ruling ideology. These ideological institutions were constituted and controlled by the ruling class, where they impose bourgeois ideology on the working class either by violent force or by indoctrination. This kind of ideological dominance of the aristocrats is still perpetuated and permeated when Shcherbuk poses a pertinent question out of anger:

Liberty, Equality, Fraternity. Hogwash. Me? I'm a Darwinist, pure and simple. I have science behind me when I say that blood and breeding will decide the fate of the species. Noble blood equals pure breeding ... Equality I ask you. Was it some scummy peasant who gave us art, music, literature, science ...? You think a bunch of wet-arsed slugs created Peterseburg, do you? Ha! (87)

Shcherbuk strongly believes in the concept of 'Blueblood' and reinforces the deep roots of the noble blood. He neither encourages nor entertains the peasants to participate in their own class disintegration. Even though many of the aristocrats in the play at least pretend to accept the society in transition, whereas Shcherbuk stands aloof and pontificates about the false class consciousness:

Bluebloods, that's who! Whatever's good, whatever's *best* on this earth is the work of the aristocrat. Absolutely. But today what do we do, mm? We smile on every kind of riff-raff. Kulaks, bottle washers, clerks and postmasters, no ideas, no ideals ... Civilization itself is under threat. Like germs, the scum will gobble everything they touch. Peasants, shopkeepers, scum everywhere, as far as the eye can see. Where are the blueblood now, eh? (101)

The inflammatory speech further marks the ideological antagonism between 'the blueblood and the scum' and leaves an indelible mark of humiliation on the minds of the peasants. He insultingly addresses them: 'know your place, you rabble'. (102)

As usual Griffiths makes his 'own' piece of this play by incorporating his dramatic device of dialectical confrontation between two characters through Shcherbuk and Petrin. Shcherbuk's crucial counter-balance in the play is Petrin, the son of a former serf, who becomes rich enough to buy the estate on which his father never dared to enter. On the whole the play takes up a politically radical turn when Petrin becomes voice for the voiceless peasants like Lopakhin in *The Cherry Orchard*. Petrin is the chief creditor to Anna at the same time enjoys his power over her. Unable to bear the humiliation Petrin immediately vents his pent-up emotions. The bitter diatribe between Petrin and Shcherbuk indicates the 'dialectical strategy' of Griffiths, which becomes his ideological tool to bring radical social change:

Because my father was a worker and his serf ... But just bear in mind, will you, that what you've eaten and supped here tonight was bought from my pocket. And the fireworks, mm? And the gun, the piano? I'm the reason you people survive. It's scum like me keeps you afloat... PavelPetrovichShcherbuk, the mighty Lionheart, son of aristocrats, proud to be a blueblood ...but what use are you to anyone? You think the world's prepared to go on feeding you forever because you have blue blood in your veins? (102)

Unarguably, it is the economic 'base that determines the cultural superstructure'. These are the true words of the real 'base' who challenges the decaying aristocrat. The radical change of working class from producing to purchasing the goods is a turnaround in the society. 'The gun' and 'the piano' were once the material symbols of superstructure but now Petrin can afford for the same class. Finally the 'Piano' was brought and bought by the same working class. Petrin's polemical attack against aristocrats in general makes Shcherbuk to leave the place without food. He firmly asserts the indispensable part of economic base in the society "... the world has no need of you. These days, the world needs scum. I'm scum ... I can turn my hand to anything". (102) The play has a close affinity with Chekhov's *The Cherry Orchard* (1904) which echoes the voice of Lopakhin, the worker who has bought the estate of Ranevskya in auction, where his father was not even allowed into the kitchen. Chekhov's drama served as a major breakthrough in abolition of serfdom and marked the celebration of a watershed where the workers are allowed to own what they produce. It is clearly perceptible when Petrin contemplates: "My dad was terrified of this place, wouldn't come near it. And I've sat in every room in the house exchanging pleasantries' with her Excellence. . ." (102)

Being one of the critical forces since 60s Griffiths dismantled the constructed historical periphery which has already deployed by Chekhov, the 'change agent'. Chekhov could not revolutionize his characters because of censorship but Griffiths reworked and gave an overt political voice to it. His working class background shaped him to explore the realities of the downtrodden. He is aware of the fact of 'history of the class struggle' and believes "most of the history that is taught is ruling class history". (51) He made a strenuous attempt to attack

the established power system. Hence many of his plays are a paradigm for audience, where he tried to terminate the existing power politics and the power hierarchy in the society. It is interesting to note that when Eagleton anticipates the shift of metaphorical structure of base and superstructure from 'vertical' to 'horizontal', which could enable the 'base' to 'emerge as the future'. When the base is affected by the political revolution slowly it transforms to the 'vertical' position.

Piano is thoroughly about the juxtaposition of ideas and ideals. It represents a group of aristocrats pursuing his or her dreams, fantasies, goals in the play. It includes a pair of lovers and married couples, where all of them become nostalgic about their past goals. They have gathered for the first time after their separation for seven years, during which each of them promised to meet certain goals and ideals. But none of them has succeeded in their attempts. The late – nineteenth century Russia underwent a radical political transition due to which these characters were imprisoned in their own false ideals. John Peter observes in his review in *Sunday Times* (12 Aug 1990): "It captures that eerie, humid moment which precedes the storm of disintegration and defeat".

Like Chekhov, Griffiths also views them objectively and does not seem to be sympathizing but ridiculing the life of decadent bourgeoisie. At the backdrop of socio-political transition the aristocrats undergo a state of social inertia. Sergei decides to give all his 'old suits' and 'old shoes' to peasants and further supports his wife Sophia to bottle-feed the farmers' children. By doing so Sophia 'plays a role as pseudo-social activist that is empty and fruitless' (Reinelt 166). This sudden rise of welfare plans formed by this ruling class was only to suppress and disarm the rebellious attitude in the peasants during the transitional period of social reformations. The reason behind formulating such immediate welfare schemes is to retain their power and privileges with themselves to perpetuate the dominant ideology.

One of the most conspicuous characters in *Piano* is Platonov, the eponymous character in Chekhov's play *Fatherlessness*. He precisely enunciates the traumatic condition of these dispossessed. His life is a total fiasco. He is desired by almost every woman in the play. Once he had high ideals and was a gifted poet who might have been a Minister of State but now an ordinary and unsuccessful school teacher. Griffiths skillfully balances 'the personal and the political' conflict within the social matrix. Even at the age of thirty five Platonov has achieved 'nothing' and further thinks of fleeing away from 'this miserable, meaningless life.' As most of the Chekhovian characters feel to escape. Instead of blaming himself he blames everyone. Platonov himself aptly describes his deplorable condition in a very passionate way:

(Huge, hopeless voice) I'm thirty-five years old, that's what it is, I'm thirty-five years old and yes I'm hurt, I'm hurt, I'm hurt . . . All gone. Thirty five years, all gone, I'm nothing, do you hear me? . . . Thirty five years of age and a complete nonentity! . . . I've achieved nothing! Nothing . . . A useless, worthless, hopeless nothing! *(Shashenka hurries indoors, calling his name. Platonov smashes pianola with fists: a sort of crazy music leaps from it, he throws himself blindly against it, knocking and yelling.)* Stop it, stop it, you . . . machine, you . . . (111)

The rupture of piano symbolizes the entire ruling class's fury and frustration against working class revolt and it became difficult for them to cope with the changing time. Towards the end of the play he is completely filled with remorse and regret. He soon realizes the futility of their life which is the result of their past deeds. "Only once betray, only once deny what you love and believe in, and the web of pretending and lying you spin will hold you fast forever". He speaks like MmeRanevsky who refers to her deeds as 'sins'. The social transition has affected both the classes in distinctive ways; the peasants who embrace the change in a radical way, on the other the aristocrats want to retrieve into the past status and for them society must be as it was. Anna often insists, "Nothing changes. Everything will be as it was". (113) The changing and challenging socio-political scenario cripples the aristocratic spirit to break the 'deadlock'. But certainly change is indispensable as Janelle Reinelt observes in *After Brecht: British Epic Theatre*. "In fact, things change; those who are exploiters are truly eaten by their own sins: someone may come after". (Reinelt 163)

Samuel Beckett's most often quoted phrase in *Waiting for Godot* (1955) 'nothing can be done' takes a radical transformation in Griffiths's world, as 'something can be done'. The 'something' that emerged from 'nothing' is undoubtedly a contribution and celebration of working-class struggle. Society should witness the radical change. The ideological juxtaposition between the aristocrats and the peasants marks revolutionary change. The brightening dawn towards the end of the play symbolizes a fresh lease of life and offers a new way for transformation. The play ends with a counterstatement to the aristocratic yearning of 'Nothing changes. Everything will be as it was" (113). But Radish envisages for a better world and hopes for 'the possibility of change' in future: "Grass dies. Iron rusts. Lies eat the soul. . . Everything's possible". (113) To elaborate further, it is a radical transformation of postmodern Pinterian desire to see the ideological change emerging in *Mountain Language* (1988). One can register the same socialist commitment of the playwrights from Anton Chekhov down to Griffiths in their plays and method of presentation. In one of his interviews Griffiths rightly asserts:

My plays are never about the battle between socialism and capitalism. I take that as being decisively

won by socialism. What I'm really seeking is the way forward. How do we transform this husk of capitalist meaning into the reality of socialist enterprise? The socialist future! (Griffiths 133)

Work Cited

- [1] Marx and Engels. *The Communist Manifesto*. Moscow: Progress Publishers. 1969. (volume 1)
- [2] Marx and Engels. *A Critique of the German Ideology*. Progress Publishers: Moscow, 1968. Marx/Engels Internet Archive. (Marxist.org) 2000.
- [3] Marx, Karl. Preface and Introduction to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*. Peking: Foreign Languages Press. 1976.
- [4] Hall, Stuart. "Re- thinking the 'Base and Superstructure' Metaphor" in T. Bloomfield et al (eds) *Class, Hegemony and poetry*. London: U. Lawrence & Wishers, 1977.
- [5] Eagleton, Terry. *Marxism and Literary Criticism*. London and New York: Methuen & Co Ltd, 1976.
- [6] Catherine Itzin. *Stages in the Revolution: Political Theatre in Britain Since 1968*. London: Eyre Methuen Ltd., 1980.
- [7] Griffiths, Trevor. *Piano in Theatre Plays Two*. Nottingham: Spokesperson, 2007.
- [8] Williams, Raymond. "Base and Superstructure in Marxist Cultural Theory" in *Problems in Materialism and Culture*. London: Verso Editions, 1980.
- [9] Marx, Engels, Lenin. *On the Dictatorship of the Proletariat: A Collection*. Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1984.
- [10] Garner Jr. Stanton B. *Trevor Griffiths: Politics, Drama, History*. U.S. A: The University of Michigan Press, 1999.
- [11] Eagleton, Terry, Ed. *Raymond Williams: Critical Perspectives*. Polity Press: Cambridge, 1989.
- [12] Peter, John. Rev. of *Piano* by Trevor Griffiths. *Sunday Times*. 12 Aug 1990.
- [13] Reinelt, Janelle. *After Brecht: British Epic Theatre*. U.S. A: The University of Michigan Press. 1996.
- [14] Trussler, Simon, Ed. *New Theatre Voices of the Seventies: Sixteen Interviews from Theatre Quarterly 1972-1980*. London: Eyre Methuen Ltd, 1981.