

"To Write or to Resist": Adorno's Response to Sartre's *What Is Literature?*

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Abstract:

In this article I reconstruct the seminal mid-twentieth century intellectual debate between Jean-Paul Sartre and Theodor W. Adorno concerning the societal role of literature. In particular, I probe the tension between political commitment (*littérature engagée*) and aesthetic autonomy. Through a critical text-based analysis of Sartre's *What Is Literature?* (1948) and Adorno's seminal essay *Commitment* (1962), this study argues that Adorno's rigorous defense of aesthetic autonomy is a more nuanced, robust, and structurally deep model of socio-political resistance than Sartre's instrumentalized prose. The article maps this philosophical difference onto the ground of Indian Literature and Pedagogy, historically and in the present, moving beyond the theoretical application of Eurocentric ideas. It explores the ideological formations of the Progressive Writers' Movement (PWM) and the structural tactics of postcolonial Indian fiction, showing how Adorno's insistence on formal estrangement avoids the didactic pitfalls of state or party propaganda. Finally, the article situates this debate in the current pedagogical landscape of India, especially in the light of the structural changes mandated by the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020. It advocates a non-binary, unified pedagogical framework in which writing becomes a site of deep cultural resistance through its formal estrangement and refusal of commodification, rather than through overt didactic political messaging.

Keywords: commitment; autonomy; Sartre; Adorno; literary pedagogy; aesthetic resistance; NEP 2020.

Introduction

The mid-twentieth-century post-war debate between Jean-Paul Sartre and Theodor W. Adorno on the socioeconomic function of literature crystallized as the dialectic between political engagement and aesthetic autonomy remains a foundational locus for interrogating the relationship between art and social transformation (Jay, 1984). In the aftermath of global

totalitarianism, the Holocaust, and the late-capitalist consolidation, the question of whether the literary text should be an explicit tool of political liberation or remain aloof as a self-sufficient critique was urgent. Sartre's *What Is Literature?* (1948) made an existentialist demand that the writer recognize his situated freedom and use prose as an intentional, transparent medium for social justice and political action. But Adorno's *Commitment* (1962) argued that art that deliberately commits itself to an outside political agenda forfeits its unique critical power and, in effect, repeats the instrumental rationality of the very systems of domination it opposes. Adorno argued that genuine literary resistance lies in the formal configurations of the autonomous work rather than its overt thematic messaging.

This article argues that Adorno's defense of aesthetic autonomy, often misread in postcolonial scholarship as an elitist retreat from historical reality, offers critical leverage for contemporary Indian literary pedagogy. This perspective is worth considering in the context of the structural emphasis on 'humanities for all' and integrated multidisciplinary learning advocated by India's National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 (Nagarajan, 2021). Literature in the contemporary global South is under increasing pressure to demonstrate its value through market driven metrics or explicit moral didacticism. Thus, the tension between Sartre's socially situated writer and Adorno's structurally autonomous text is immediately relevant. This, seemingly polar opposite, requires an examination of the socio-cultural imperatives in postcolonial India that can synthesize the two.

This article demonstrates that autonomy and commitment are not opposing binaries by examining the historical trajectory of the Progressive Writers' Movement and postcolonial fiction through the lens of Western critical theory and the material realities of Indian literature. Instead, they represent a dialectical tension necessary to the development of critical consciousness in the contemporary classroom. Ultimately, this study offers an alternative model for reading and teaching literature in India where the text is an autonomous space that resists ideological appropriation by refusing to be functionalist, state or market driven.

Sartre and Adorno on Commitment-1945.

The theoretical split between Jean-Paul Sartre and the Frankfurt School thinkers, in particular Theodor W. Adorno, in 1945, represents a core disagreement in Twentieth Century Marxist and Western Marxist aesthetic philosophy. Sartre's *What Is Literature?* depicted writing as an inescapable act of historical intervention. For Sartre, the writer is in situation; to be silent or to produce art for art's sake is a choice that tacitly condones the socio-political inequities of the status quo (Sartre, 1948).

In contrast to poetry and the visual arts, which he saw as treating language as an object rather than a sign, Sartre asserted that prose is inherently communicative. The writer serves as a

mediator of consciousness since prose serves as a signifier pointing toward external facts. To write is to reveal the world, and to reveal the world is to demand that it be changed. Consequently, committed literature (*littérature engagée*) is a direct application of existential freedom that seeks to elicit from the reader a matching acknowledgment of freedom in order to force cooperative political action.

Adorno's *Commitment* offered a comprehensive critique of this viewpoint, contending that Sartre's instrumental method neutralizes the literary text's radical potential by reducing it to a vehicle for external ideologies (Adorno, 1962). According to Adorno's perspective in Frankfurt School critical theory, the culture industry of late capitalism easily absorbs explicit political messages, commodifying them and turning them into neutral cultural consumer commodities. A literary work that takes a didactic political position conforms to the instrumental rationality of the prevailing social framework, which requires that everything have an obvious, marketable purpose.

Adorno claimed that because dedicated literature adopts the same communication clarity and logical coherence that the culture business uses to coerce conformity, it usually ends up confirming the existing quo it tries to challenge. Adorno contended that the work's formal discord and internal contradictions are the source of true resistance. The independent artwork reveals the cracks of a broken reality without giving up to ideological closure by declining to provide simple consumption or overt political solutions.

The historical development of the Progressive Writers' Movement (PWM) in India bears a striking resemblance to the theoretical conflict between Sartre and Adorno (Guha, 2009). The PWM, which was founded in the 1930s under the influence of Marxist aesthetics and the anti-colonial movement, clearly connected literary creation with anti-imperialist activism and socioeconomic upheaval.

The novel form was actively used by writers connected to the movement, such as Mulk Raj Anand, to highlight class exploitation, caste-based oppression, and agricultural suffering in colonial India. Anand's groundbreaking books, *Coolie* (1936) and *Untouchable* (1935), are prime examples of a Sartrean commitment, in which writing acts as a direct call to action against systematic dehumanization.

But this clear alignment brings up the very crucial issue that Adorno pointed out: did their overt political commitment weaken the art's formal and critical integrity? Writing in the PWM occasionally ran the potential of devolving into didactic moralizing or socialist realism, which condensed complicated socio-historical facts into predictable ideological narratives. The literary work may lose the internal tension necessary to question underlying

cognitive mechanisms if characterization and narrative form are subservient to a preconceived political agenda. The PWM's history shows that although Sartre's committed prose model is a potent instrument for historical mobilization, it is nonetheless susceptible to the aesthetic and ideological limitations that Adorno outlined.

Sartre: The Writer, Freedom, and Prose in Context

The connection between the act of literary creation and the ontological actuality of human freedom is fundamental to Jean-Paul Sartre's aesthetic philosophy. According to Sartre, the writer actively participates in the world's continuous production rather than just observing it. In order to prevent readers from claiming ignorance of systematic injustices, the writer's job is to expose the human condition within a particular, often oppressive historical context (Sartre, 1948).

According to Sartre, language is a "call to action" that speaks to the reader's freedom and is an intentional act of revelation (Bernard, 2019). The prose writer use language plainly as a tool to influence reality, in contrast to the poet, who stays engrossed in the tangible texture of words. According to Sartre, authors should write for their peers and directly address the pressing historical issues of their time, whether they are related to class conflict, colonial exploitation, or totalitarian rule. But this presents an important theoretical question: does Sartre's emphasis on political utility and communicative clarity reduce literature to an illustrative instrument for political ideology or philosophy? Sartre's theory finds it difficult to explain works that create resistance through ambiguity, linguistic experimentation, and structural disruption since it prioritizes the literary work's immediate communicative purpose over its formal components. Examining how authors interacted with inherited imperial languages in postcolonial contexts reveals this shortcoming.

Raja Rao and other writers in early postcolonial India had to deal with the difficulty of expressing a unique cultural sensibility and articulating a nascent national consciousness in the language of the colonizer. Rao noted in his well-known foreword to *Kanthapura* (1938) that English is not a foreign language to Indians, but rather one that needs to be modified to express a rhythm and emotional texture specific to the Indian experience. Rao's narrative experimentation, which combines English prose with the vernacular styles of traditional Sthalapuranas, might be seen as a meeting point of Adorno's independence and Sartre's dedication. Because it made room for subaltern histories and anti-colonial resistance inside the prevailing imperial discourse, it was an act of political commitment. Rao did not merely employ English as a clear vehicle for political messages; it also depended on artistic autonomy. Rather than simply substituting its thematic content, he broke and rearranged its formal syntax, proving that postcolonial resistance necessitates changing the artistic medium itself.

Adorno: Sartre's Critique and the Autonomy Defense

The central claim of Theodor W. Adorno's criticism of Sartre is that dedicated art frequently gives in to ideological closure, negating its own critical potential (Adorno, 1962). According to Adorno, literature that supports an outside political goal adopts the instrumentalizing logic of the prevailing social order, which requires all intellectual output to demonstrate its practical value. This need for instant relevance under late capitalism immediately results in cultural industry co-optation. A political message becomes a commodity like any other once it is translated into understandable, palatable prose, giving readers the appearance of critical participation while reinforcing their underlying conformity.

According to Adorno, genuine resistance is found in the formal autonomy of the work rather than its explicit content; literature subverts prevailing ideologies precisely by being deemed "useless" by market-driven criteria (Jay, 1984). Instead of directly depicting the inconsistencies, fractures, and systemic violence of society, the autonomous artwork creates an internal space where these elements are reflected through structural dissonance. This aesthetic autonomy model provides an effective framework for analyzing postcolonial Indian fiction, especially pieces that use formal experimentation to challenge both colonial and nationalist narratives. *The God of Small Things* by Arundhati Roy (1997) is a prime example of this Adornoian paradigm. Roy's book does not use a simple, realistic storyline to criticize sexism, the caste system, or postcolonial state violence. Rather, it depends on language neologisms, a non-linear, fractured structure, unusual capitalization, and a dual perspective that alternates between adult pain and childhood memories.

Roy's narrative methods are too complex to be reduced to a simple political platform. Rather of offering overt political solutions, the text's formal fragmentation mirrors the psychological and historical divisions of its protagonists' lives. By subverting conventional novelistic structure, *The God of Small Things* undermines both the established caste system and the modern state's attempts to impose a cohesive, nationalist narrative. By reaching its socio-political critique through aesthetic autonomy rather than didacticism, the novel shows how formal alienation can reveal institutional cruelty more clearly than straightforward political discourse.

Cultural Aspect: The Critical Theorist vs the Public Intellectual

Theodor W. Adorno's model of the critical theorist and Jean-Paul Sartre's model of the highly prominent public intellectual represent two different conceptions of the intellectual's societal role (Bhattacharya, 2020). Sartre personified the intellectual who makes use of their cultural capital to directly participate in public discussions, sign manifestos, participate in political demonstrations, and write readable writing meant for

quick mobilization. According to Sartre, intellectuals should act as the conscience of their time by opposing official authority and promoting liberation movements in public spaces. Adorno, on the other hand, deliberately avoided direct political activism and party affiliation by adopting the role of the critical theorist. Adorno thought that immediate political engagement can unintentionally perpetuate the same coercive dynamics it aimed to dismantle in a time controlled by the cultural industry and totalizing ideology. It is the responsibility of the critical theorist to protect thought against ideological appropriation by maintaining a capacity for negative critique and examining the underlying mechanisms of social dominance from a position of relative detachment.

Given the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 and its humanities-related initiatives, this opposition is extremely pertinent to India's current educational environment (Nagarajan, 2021). The NEP 2020 promotes "humanities for all" as a way to develop civic engagement, ethical foundation, and critical thinking while emphasizing a multidisciplinary approach. The humanities are, nevertheless, also subtly pressured by this policy context to justify their existence through utility, whether by supporting cultural nationalism, skill development, or economic productivity.

In this situation, institutional expectations for instant, quantifiable civic utility or surface-level social participation might readily appropriate Sartre's model of the public intellectual. Adorno's criticism provides a crucial remedy in this case. Adorno tells us that the humanities and literature derive their greatest worth from their ability to be detached and critical rather than from their immediate usefulness. The literary work retains its ability to question prevailing societal paradigms by defying the need for immediate application, giving pupils a critical thinking experience that cannot be boiled down to practical abilities or ideological conformity.

Comprehensive Applications: Reading Adorno and Sartre in Indian Classrooms

A potent tool for contemporary Indian higher education is the use of a critical pedagogical approach that engages Theodor W. Adorno and Jean-Paul Sartre in conversation, especially in the heterogeneous classrooms of institutions like those in India. Teaching Adorno's intricate *Aesthetic Theory* (1970) in conjunction with Sartre's existential book *Nausea* (1938) gives students a dynamic framework for examining the relationship between literary form and political conviction.

Students can see how Sartre's ideas of radical freedom and historical responsibility are illustrated in *Nausea* by seeing how Roquentin's existential dread and experiences with contingency are communicated through a diary format. By comparing this with Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory*, students are taught to go beyond the overt storyline and consider how

formal aspects of a book, including linguistic fragmentation, tonal shifts, and narrative gaps, might subvert prevailing ideas by defying simple comprehension. By encouraging students to examine a text's structural mechanics as well as its thematic points, this comparison method discourages passive consumption.

Classroom evaluation emphasizes clear thematic depictions of class and caste battles in prose through a Sartrean educational lens focused on involvement, viewing language as a useful tool to reclaim identity and voice socio-political demands. Through direct societal critique, this point of view uses literature to promote ethical responsibility and active civic engagement. On the other hand, an Adornian pedagogical perspective that emphasizes autonomy changes the focus of instruction to examine how formal dissonance and structural fragmentation reflect macro-level structural disparities.

In this paradigm, teachers use negative dialectics to strengthen students' ability for critical resistance against institutional co-optation by deconstructing linguistic syntax to subvert prevailing imperialist or nationalist discourses. By combining these approaches, undergraduate students are guaranteed to learn how to analyse the resistant architecture of textuality as well as the thematic reasons of authorial aim.

This all-encompassing strategy is in line with India's National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, which places a strong emphasis on developing "critical thinking" and eschewing rote memorization (Nagarajan, 2021). Pedagogical frameworks that allow students to interact with complex, confusing, and contradictory perspectives are necessary in order to meet the NEP 2020's call for holistic education. Students can overcome the tendency to see literature as a storehouse of moral teachings or a reflection of historical realities by introducing the Sartre-Adorno argument into the classroom. Rather, they are taught to examine the text as a contested area where form and content are always interacting.

When reading postcolonial Indian poetry or fiction, for instance, students can utilize Adorno to examine how the text's formal features defy institutional absorption and commodification while using Sartre to assess the author's overt social participation. This method aids in the development of critical literacy abilities in students, empowering them to assess literary works as well as the larger cultural and political narratives influencing modern society.

Beyond the Binary: An Integrated Structure

This article suggests that Jean-Paul Sartre and Theodor W. Adorno could be seen as complementing poles of a single dialectical framework for literary analysis and instruction rather than as an irreconcilable dichotomy. Prioritizing one over the other runs the risk of

restricting the range of critical thought: dedication without independence can quickly turn into propaganda, didacticism, or socialist realism, turning literature into a dependable medium for preexisting beliefs.

On the other hand, an isolated formalism that separates the text from the material circumstances and conflicts that shaped its development can result from an exclusive concern on autonomy without historical context. A balanced critical approach acknowledges that the conflict between a literary work's formal independence and its historical context determines how resistant it is. Literature challenges prevailing societal institutions through its inherent design, establishing its own distinct mode of life rather than merely presenting political slogans or policy recommendations.

This cohesive framework provides a useful approach for interacting with texts from various historical periods and cultural traditions in the context of Indian literature and pedagogy. While paying attention to the formal decisions, the linguistic innovations, structural disruptions, and aesthetic strategies that shield these texts from appropriation by the culture industry, it enables educators and critics to appreciate the political commitment propelling movements like the Progressive Writers' Movement or contemporary Dalit literature.

Readers can understand how writing can be passionately committed exactly through its aesthetic choices by examining the literary work as an intersection of formal autonomy and historical engagement. This dual viewpoint helps students understand that literature's ultimate worth is found in its reluctance to function as a straightforward tool, providing instead a sophisticated setting for resistance and critical thought.

Conclusion

The moving dedication of *Minima Moralia* by Theodor W. Adorno "To my friends" serves as an intriguing metaphor for a different conception of resistance that is based on solidarity and critical thought rather than overt political slogans. Adorno's commitment suggests an internal kind of resistance, whereas Sartre's notion of participation calls for immediate, external political action in the public realm. It places a strong emphasis on maintaining human connections, critical consciousness, and artistic integrity in a heavily commercialized environment.

This viewpoint redefines what it means to be involved with literature for Indian writers, critics, and students navigating a modern environment influenced by institutional demands for utility and market-driven educational practices. In the end, literature achieves its strongest resistance when it defends its formal autonomy and refuses to be merely useful,

rather than when it complies with external political goals or functional needs. Literature continues to question prevailing social institutions by upholding its aesthetic distance, demonstrating that its real revolutionary potential resides in its resistance to be appropriated by the established quo.

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