



THE DYNAMICS OF CLASS STRUGGLE IN LITERATURE: REFLECTIONS ON TERRY EAGLETON'S MARXISM AND LITERARY CRITICISM

DR. GURJASJEET KAUR

Assistant Professor in English
Guru Nanak College Budhlada (Mansa)
(PUN) INDIA

ABSTRACT

Terry Eagleton's Marxism and Literary Criticism provides a foundational exploration of how Marxist theory applies to the study of literature. His analysis offers insights into the class struggle inherent in literary production, distribution, and reception. Terry Eagleton builds on the Marxist concept of the base (economic foundation) and superstructure (cultural and ideological institutions). Literature, as part of the superstructure, both reflects and reinforces the economic base. Literary works can reveal the class conflicts and economic conditions of their time. This paper focuses on the class struggle in the literary realm with reference to Terry Eagleton's Marxism and Literary Criticism.

Keywords: *Marxism, Base, Superstructure, Ideology, Class Struggle*

INTRODUCTION

Terry Eagleton's *Marxism and Literary Criticism* is a seminal work that provides a comprehensive analysis of the intersection between Marxist theory and literature. The book outlines how class struggle is a central theme in literary works and how literature serves as a reflection of the socio-economic conditions of its time. Eagleton has made an attempt to interpret and evaluate literature on the basis of Karl Marx's ideas and philosophy. Marxist criticism has become a very popular theory of criticism in the 20th century. It studies the nature, existence and function of art on the basis of certain ideas provided by late 19th century philosophers Karl Marx and his friend Fredrick Engels. Their ideas have been

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borrowed, modified and interpreted in various ways by different critics in the 20th century. These new interpretations and new modifications in Marxist ideas are given by modern critics like Raymond Williams, Walter Benjamin, Bertolt Brecht, Goldman and Terry Eagleton have made Marxist theory a fast growing and complex yet an interesting theory of criticism. All these 20th century Marxist critics are called neo-Marxists and their theory is called Neo-Marxist theory. Terry Eagleton is one of the most prominent literary critics and theorists of the Modern Times. His well-known books are *Criticism in Ideology*, *Marxism and Literary Criticism*, *Towards a Revolutionary Criticism*, *Literary Theory: An Introduction*, and *The Rape of Clarissa*. Terry's ideas about Marxism and the role of Marxism are not only relevant for academics only but also in bringing a change, revolution and reformation in society. He has given an altogether, new and illuminating interpretation of Marxism. He has also reviewed the theories of other neo-Marxist critics. His theories seek to establish a sensible and just relationship between Marxism and literary criticism. Terry makes Marx's ideas and philosophy the base of interpreting literature.

Terry has analysed and studied the relevance of Marxism to literary criticism under the four main subheads. These four divisions are: 1. Literature and History 2. Form and Content 3. Writer and Commitment 4. Writer and Production. This fourfold division has been made for the sake of convenience. Eagleton argues that literature is not just a reflection of the material conditions of society but also an active participant in the ideological formation. Literary texts often reinforce or challenge the dominant ideologies, making them a battleground for class struggle. For Eagleton, understanding literature requires analyzing the socio-economic context in which it was produced and the ideological messages it conveys. Terry claims in *Marxism and Literary Criticism*,

The sociology of literature concerns itself chiefly with what might be called the means of literary production, distribution and exchange in a particular society- how books are published, the social composition of their authors and the audience, levels of literacy, the social determinants of 'taste'. It also examines literary texts for their 'sociological' relevance, raiding literary works to abstract from them themes of interest to the social historian. (02)

Karl Marx essentially supported the materialistic base of the world as compared to the philosophical base. He spoke of primacy and supremacy of matter over soul. This is called his philosophical materialism. According to Karl Marx everything is in constant flux and motion in nature. There is going on a continuous and dialectical clash between the contradictory forces like body and soul, heart and head, war and peace. This is called dialectical materialism by Karl Marx and this is based on Hegel's philosophy of Thesis, Antithesis and Synthesis.

Terry Eagleton favours Marx's ideas that history is not a story of the rise and fall of the kings and queens. The whole story has been all through a process of the relationship between the two classes - the rich and the poor, the have's and have nots which are called both bourgeois and proletariat respectively by Marx. There has been a constant exploitation of the poor by the rich. But Karl Marx visualised that there will be a hold of proletariat over bourgeois and they will bring a revolution that will result into the establishment of a classless society called communism in which everyone will work according to his capacity and get according to his necessity. Marx's views About the establishment of a classless society are based on the ideas of liberty, equality and fraternity. These have been the ideals for Marxist writers and critics. Eagleton discusses the role of realism in literature, particularly how realist texts can reveal the underlying class conflicts in society. Realist literature often portrays the lives of ordinary people, their struggles, and their interactions with the ruling class, making it a powerful tool for critiquing social inequalities. Terry Eagleton observes;

Marxist Criticism is not merely a 'sociology of literature' concerned with how novels get published and whether they mention the working class. Its aim is to explain the literary work more fully and this means a sensitive attention to its forms, styles and meaning. (3)

A key concept in Marxist theory is the relationship between the base (the economic foundation of society) and the superstructure (the cultural, political, and ideological institutions). Eagleton emphasizes that literature, as part of the superstructure, both influences and is influenced by the economic base. The class struggle within literature reflects the broader economic struggles of society. Drawing on Antonio Gramsci's concept of hegemony, Eagleton explores how ruling classes maintain power not only through economic control but also through cultural dominance. Literature can either support this hegemony by promoting the values and beliefs of the ruling class or challenge it by presenting alternative viewpoints and highlighting social injustices. In *Marxism and Form*, Frederic Jameson says, "Form itself is but the working out of content in the realm of the superstructure." (20)

According to Marx's theory of Base and Superstructure the good economic base will bring good superstructure. Every superstructure is a product of the economic productive relations. The good ideas of artists, moralists and other intellectuals can bring the reform or change in the base. Terry is one of the supporters of these views. Though Marx was actually a man speaking of economic relations, he gave a very high place to the superstructure. Eagleton emphasises; "Art, then, is for Marxism part of the superstructure of society. It is . . . part of a society's ideology." (5)

He had a belief in the power of artists to act as responsible men and use literature for supporting the cause of the proletariat, to make them conscious of the exploitation and to work for their upliftment. The central role of Marxist criticism is to bring "transformation of

human societies". Karl Marx observes in *Theories of Surplus Value*, "A writer is a worker not in so far as he produces ideas, but in so far as he enriches the publisher, in so far as he is working for a wage." (53) Many neo-Marxist's believe in the Revolutionary role of the art to bring change in society. Terry believes that Marxism and Marxist history of Criticism is a very complex subject. It analysis literature in terms of the historical conditions which produce it and it needs to be aware of its historical conditions. Karl Marx and Angles did not aimed at formulating any theory rather their comments on art and literature are scattered and fragmented. Yet Marxist criticism was based on the economic and cultural theory of these philosophers. According to Marxist criticism the evolving history of mankind, its social relations, its institutions, and its modes of thinking are mostly determined by the changing modes of its material production or overall economic organisation. With every change in the mode of production, there are corresponding changes in social class structure also. Besides, it is the mode of the production which creates the dominant and subordinate classes. These two classes, after their emergence, engage in a struggle for economic, political and social advantages. Marxist criticism further states that human consciousness is created by an ideology. ideology means many sided awareness of social consciousness which has taken the form of staunch believes, values, ways of thinking and feeling through which human beings perceive reality. Georgy Plekhanov, a Russian Marxist Critic, says, "The social mentality of an age is conditioned by that age's social relations. This is nowhere quite as evident as in history of art and literature." (iv) Marxism believes that Ideology consists of a definite structure which supports the power of a particular social class. It is the product of the position and interests of a particular class. The dominant social class, first creates any ideology and then uses it to perpetuate and legitimate its position and interests. But Terry says that ideology never simply reflects the ideas of ruling class. On the contrary, it is a complex phenomenon which may incorporate contradictory views of the world. To understand any ideology, the relations between different classes in a society must be analysed. To do that, one has to understand where those classes stand in relation to the mode of production. Ideology plays a great part in society.

Thus, the central role of Marxist criticism is to bring transformation of human societies. In Terry's views, "Marxist criticism is a part of large body of theoretical and analysis which tries to understand at ideologies, i.e. the ideas, values and feelings by which men experience their societies at various times." (23) Many of these ideas, values and feelings are available only in literature. This is the relationship between Marxism and literature and hence a need for Marxist literary interpretation. The study of relationship between the historical conditions and the works of art is the basis postulate of Marxist criticism. German idealist philosopher Hegal had also adopted historical analysis of literature before Marx. He had also tried to understand literary works in terms of the history which produce them. Hegel had a profound influence on Marx's aesthetic thought but Terry remarks that the originality of Marxist criticism, "lies not

in its historical approach to literature but in its revolutionary understanding of history itself.”
(48)

Eagleton discusses the role of realism in literature, particularly how realist texts can reveal the underlying class conflicts in society. Realist literature often portrays the lives of ordinary people, their struggles, and their interactions with the ruling class, making it a powerful tool for critiquing social inequalities. According to Eagleton, writers are not passive creators but active participants in the class struggle. Their work reflects their own class positions and their engagement with the socio-political issues of their time. By choosing certain themes, characters, and narratives, writers can either uphold the status quo or challenge it. Eagleton highlights the importance of literary form in understanding class struggle. The form of a literary work (its structure, style, and genre) is closely tied to its class content. For example, the fragmentation and discontinuity in modernist literature can be seen as a response to the alienation and instability of capitalist society.

CONCLUSION:

Eagleton stresses the need to historicize literature, viewing it within the context of its production and reception. This involves understanding the historical conditions that shaped the work and how it was received by contemporary audiences. Through this historical lens, the class struggles embedded in the text become more apparent. Eagleton's *Marxism and Literary Criticism* offers a framework for analysing literature through the lens of class struggle. It emphasizes the interplay between literature and ideology, the role of writers in the socio-political landscape, and the importance of historicizing literary works.

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