

---

## POLEMICS OF AESTHETICS: EAGLETON'S APPRAISAL OF COMPETING MARXIST LITERARY THEORIES



**Dr. DILEEP EDARA**

Asst. Professor,  
Department of English and Communications,  
Dravidian University, Kuppam, AP, India

### Article Particulars

Received: 19.8.2017

Accepted: 25.8.2017

Published: 30.9.2017

---

Terry Eagleton (Terrence Francis Eagleton) is a contemporary literary scholar and a prominent cultural theorist, widely regarded as the one of the foremost Marxist literary critics. With the publication of *Marxism and Literary Criticism*, and *Literary Theory*, a popular college text, Eagleton won recognition for producing erudite works of literary criticism that explore the relationship between literature, history, and society. While Eagleton's Marxist perspective is clearly apparent in his writings, his work also demonstrates a regard for other theoretical approaches such as feminism and psychoanalysis. Eagleton displays a notable concern for the history, politics, and culture of Ireland. He expresses a desire that criticism be used to promote a more equitable society.

Eagleton's writings reflect his interest in examining ideologies as they are expressed in literature. The tool with which he prefers to examine different texts is Marxist literary theory, which takes into account—unlike New Criticism and Formalism—the relationships that historical, political, and social conditions have to works of literature. Eagleton confronts the human alienation that capitalism creates by advocating the analytical methods of Marxism.

Eagleton's influential work, *Marxism and Literary Criticism*, exerted a significant impact on the practice of literary criticism. Here Eagleton argues that the artist does not “create” something from nothing, but instead “produces” a work that is determined by historical and ideological conditions. In addition to presenting the concept of the author as producer, Eagleton also considers the relationships between form and content and that of the writer and social commitment. He offers a critical

account of various theoretical positions in Marxism, with regard to literary criticism and theory. The present article is a modest attempt to take up a critical analysis of these views.

Terry Eagleton begins his work by highlighting the individual thinkers from Marx and Engels to Lenin and Trotsky, Walter Benjamin and Bertolt Brecht, then goes on to explore the various key concepts of the individual Marxist critics including Karl Marx himself. Despite being thirty years old, the book still remains relevant in that it highlights the importance of Marxist thought in our Twenty-First century.

Marxist literary criticism is based upon the theories of the German philosopher Karl Marx. In works like *The German Ideology* and *The Communist Manifesto*, written with Frederick Engels, Marx proposes a model of history in which economic and political conditions predominate social conditions. Marx and Engels condemned and fought against the social hardships resulting from the rise of capitalism. They were political philosophers rather than literary critics, but the fragmentary aesthetic comments they had made enabled people after them to build a theory out of them. Marxist criticism distinguishes itself by its insistence on at least the following basic tenets: class struggle, materialist view of history, ideology, and the role of oppressive institutions such as the state.

### **The Materialist View of History**

Using Hegel's theory of dialectic, which suggests that history progresses through the resolution of contradictions, Marx and Engels proposed a materialist account of history that focuses upon the struggles and tensions within society? As society develops more complex modes of production, it becomes increasingly stratified; and the resulting tensions necessitate changes in society. For example, the introduction of heavy machinery into the feudal economic system fragmented existing social structures and necessitated a move towards capitalism. Marx perceived human history to have consisted of a series of struggles between classes: between the oppressed and the oppressing. For Marx, society is a conflicting ground where the exploiter appears in different names (feudal lords, capitalists etc.) and tries to dominate or exploit the working class people. As an art critic, Marx argues that, the literature is a social product and so there is a deep and inseparable attachment between the literary art and society.

### **The Base and Superstructure Model**

In Marx's materialist account of history, social being is determined by larger political and economic forces. In his famous Preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* (1859) Marx writes "The sum total of these relations of production constitutes the economic structure of society, the real foundation, on which rises a legal and political superstructure and to which correspond definite forms of social

consciousness. The mode of production of material life conditions the social, political and intellectual life process in general." He also adds that "it is not the consciousness of men that determines their being, but, on the contrary, their social being that determines consciousness."

The base is the economic system upon which the superstructure rests; ideological activities--such as law, politics, philosophy or literature--belong in the superstructure. To Marxist critics, a society's economic base determines the interests and styles of its literature; it is this relationship between determining base and determined superstructure that is a main point of interest for Marxist critics.

In fact, the base and superstructure paradigm is one of the most controversial aspects of Marxist literary theories, and the present author also made a contribution to this debate in a book published in 2016, with the title *Biography of a Blunder: Base and Superstructure in Marx and Later*, wherein, it is argued among other things, that Marx's original dialectical formulation was gradually distorted through a series of misreadings and revisions.

### **Ideology and Literature**

It is commonly held in the Marxist tradition that because the superstructure is determined by the base, it inevitably supports the base. Ideologies are the changing ideas, values, and feelings through which individuals experience their societies. They present the dominant ideas and values as the beliefs of society as a whole, thus preventing individuals from seeing how society actually functions. Literature, as a cultural production, is a form of ideology, one that expresses the dominant ideas of the ruling class.

Ideology is often used in the sense of false consciousness in the Marxist tradition. It is claimed that the social orientation of the author tends to influence the types of characters that will develop, the political ideas displayed and the economical statements developed in the text. The simplest goals of Marxist literary criticism can include an assessment of the political 'tendency' of a literary work, determining whether its social content or its literary form are 'progressive'. It also includes analysing the class constructs demonstrated in the literature.

### **Georg Lukács and the Social Realism**

There is a great deal of difference in opinion among Marxist literary critics concerning the relationship between ideology and literature. Since Marx's own writing, theorists such as the Soviet social realists, Georg Lukács, and Louis Althusser have gradually modified or expanded on Marx's original concepts. The Soviet socialist realists believe that because ideology is part of the superstructure, it must correspond to the economic base of society. For Lukács, form is the true bearer of social ideology. Scott, Balzac, and Mann are the exemplary writers for Lukács.

Lukács maintained that it is doubtful whether Marx and Engels themselves took such a deterministic approach to literature. In their work, literature is not merely a passive reflection of the economic base. Although they conceded that literature cannot change society, or base, in itself, they suggested that literature can be an active element in such change. Marx conceded a special place to Greek art in spite of its underdeveloped social base. On the whole, Georg Lukács maintained a realistic stance. For him, the central concepts are totality, typicality, and the world historical significance of the text.

### **Lucien Goldmann's Genetic Epistemology**

Later, Lucien Goldmann sought to synthesize the "genetic epistemology" of Piaget with the Marxism of Lukács and proposed the theory of "genetic structuralism" which he developed in the 1960s; and this has great utility for literary analysis. In his influential study, *The Hidden God: a Study of Tragic Vision in the Pensees of Pascal and the Tragedies of Racine*, he offered a critique of Kant, Pascal, and Racine, and formulated a general approach that came to be known as "genetic structuralism" to analyse the problems of philosophy, literary criticism, and of the relationship between thought and action in human society. As Mitchell Cohen rightly put in his introduction to his book on Goldmann: "Concurrently, he contested the structuralist, scientific, and antihumanist theorizing infecting French left-wing circles in that tumultuous decade. Had he lived into the 1970s, he would undoubtedly have had little patience with postmodernism."

### **Antonio Gramsci's Concept of Hegemony**

The Italian theorist Antonio Gramsci, with his concept of hegemony, allows for an even more flexible reading of the base/superstructure model. Gramsci believes that ideology alone cannot explain the extent to which people are willing to accept dominant values. In a way, Gramsci's notion of hegemony is a continuation of the concepts behind ideology. Hegemony is a sort spontaneous consent in which the individual forgets his/her own desires and accepts dominant values as their own. Hegemony is not just the dominance of the ruling class in the socio-economic spheres; it, rather, entails a general dominance of the ruling class that is willingly acquiesced by the oppressed and the subalterns. As Eagleton emphasises rightly, this concept of Gramsci allowed a flexible and productive alternative for the concept of ideology.

### **Althusser's Ideological State Apparatuses**

The French theorist Louis Althusser considers the relationship between literature and ideology, taking forward Antonio Gramsci's concept of hegemony. Althusser suggests that ideology and hegemony, like literature, present a constructed version of reality, one which does not necessarily reflect the actual conditions of life. Thus, literature

neither merely reflects ideology, nor can it be reduced to it. But he formulates his ideas based on what he called as the “ideological state apparatuses.”

Literature may be situated within ideology, but it can also distance itself from ideology—thereby allowing the reader to gain an awareness of the ideology on which it is based. For example, a novel may present the world in a way that seems to support dominant ideologies, but as a work of fiction it also reveals those ideologies. So, once again, although literature itself cannot change society, it can be an active part of such changes.

### **Macherey's Theory of Literary Production**

Pierre Macherey's *A Theory of Literary Production* regarded a text as not an autonomous or once-created object, but as an assemblage of material unconsciously worked over, by following Lenin's view of Tolstoy. Ideology may be lived entirely naturally, but once ideology enters into a text all its gaps and contradictions become exposed.

The author attempts to cover them up — the very choice of saying something means that other things cannot be said— and the critic attends to the repressed and unspoken: a theory with obvious Psychoanalytic ramifications. For Macherey, it is not only the explicit enunciations of the text that embodies its ideological underpinnings but also the gaps and silences of the text also represent and reveal its ideological configurations. Eagleton rightly underscores the subtle analysis that this view makes possible in the Marxist critical tradition.

### **Walter Benjamin on the Work of Art**

Walter Benjamin, a friend and supporter of Brecht's formal achievements, highlights the fact that the text is the result of writer's activity. Thus it is determined by the available techniques of production, as Marx stated about material production. So, the revolutionary writer should bring about new techniques and media of art into the making of his text. His theories found practical application in the Epic Theatre of Brecht where the production relations between the stage and audience; between text and the writer etc., changed along with change in technique. By keeping the text always provisional and by making audience the active participants of the play, Brecht effected a radical change in the technique of his plays. Also, in his influential essay, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” anthologised in his *Illuminations*, Benjamin explored the effects of technical change on the works of art.

But Eagleton under-appreciates this aspect of Benjamin, because he believes, not reasonably so far I understand, that the productive forces cannot exert such direct effect on the products of art. Notable here is the way how John Berger takes forward this analysis of Benjamin, in his seminal study, *Ways of Seeing*.

## Brecht's Epic Theatre

Social realism was Brecht's detestation, but his famous technique of "barring the device" is derived from the Russian Formalist concept of defamiliarization. Actors in Brecht's plays express emotion, but only by gestures which the audience can understand but not identify with. Improvisation is used extensively, plus anything that came to hand. Brecht rejected a formal construction of plays and was constantly attempting to unmask the disguises of an ever-devious capitalist system.

The controversy between Lukács and Brecht is the proof for the creative tension in Marxism, without which no theory can remain lively. The issue of contention here is the debate between Realism, supported by Lukács, and Modernism with its propensity for stylistic experimentations. Through his colossally successful Epic Theatre, Brecht demonstrated how the modernist experiments can be used for revolutionary purposes. This controversy between the Titans of Marxist literary theory: Lukács and Brecht is an on-going debate and Eagleton deftly presents the pros and cons of both the sides in the debate, without being tempted to give a hasty conclusion to that. After all, no living theoretical tradition can be free from theoretical loose ends and unsettled issues.

## References

1. Althusser, Louis. *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*. Trans. Ben Brewster. New York: Monthly Review Press, 1971. Print.
2. Benjamin, Walter. *Illuminations*. New York: Schocken Books, 2007. Print.
3. Berger, John, et al. *Ways of Seeing*. London: Penguin Books, 1973. Print.
4. Brecht, Bertolt. "A Short Organum for the Theatre". *Approaches in Literary Theory: Marxism*. Ed. Anand Prakash. Delhi: Worldview, 2002. Print.
5. Cohen, Mitchell. *The Wager of Lucien Goldmann: Tragedy, Dialectics, and a Hidden God*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1994. Print.
6. Eagleton, Terry. *Marxism and Literary Criticism*. London: Methuen, 1987. Print.
7. Edara, Dileep. *Biography of a Blunder: Base and Superstructure in Marx and Later*. UK: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2016. Print.
8. Goldmann, Lucien. *The Hidden God: a Study of Tragic Vision in the Pensées of Pascal and the Tragedies of Racine*. London: Routledge, 1964. Print.
9. Macherey, Pierre. *A Theory of Literary Production*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978. Print.
10. Marx, Karl. *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*. Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1989. Print.