



TERRY EAGLETON'S "LITERATURE AND HISTORY": A CRITICAL STUDY

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ABSTRACT

Material production is regarded as the ultimate determining factor of social existence and class struggle is viewed as the central dynamic of historical development. Eagleton is aware of the highly mediated and complex relation between Base and Superstructure but his aptly Marxist insistence on the primacy of material production can be seen to be the basis of virtually all his attacks on non- Marxist literary theory.

Key Words: Base, Superstructure, Dialectical, Form , content etc.

INTRODUCTION:

Marxist criticism studies the materialist and social character of literature . It is influenced by the politics of Marxism , which is essentially a critique of capitalism. It studies literature in relation to its social, economic and historical contexts. It Examines the relation between the ideas and values expressed in a work of literature and the ideas and values prevalent in contemporary society . It attempts to study the relation of literature with class struggles and conflicts between social groups for economic and political power. It undertakes an ideological study of literature, in the sense that it examines literature as the direct expression of class interests. Such study is carried out in two ways- a) by showing how certain ideas and values are structurally imposed through a literary work and b) by showing the apparatus of publishing and distribution .

MARX'S TREATMENT OF LITERATURE:



Marx himself was an author in his youth and wrote lyric poems. His writing are full of literary concept and allusions . Marx is greatly influenced by the literary concept of Sophocles to Spanish novel. It is true that Marx did not offer a aesthetic theory of literature but Marx’s engagement with art and literature proved that he regard art and literature seriously.

EAGLATON EXAMINE THE NOTION OF ‘SOCIOLOGY OF LITERATURE’ :

This notion is very much prevalent in the west. Eaglaton defines this process which deals with literary production , distribution and exchange in particular society. It also focus on the publication of books, author’s status and the readers literacy . Sociology of literature is one of the important aspects of Marxist criticism. It deals with explaining of a literary work more fully. This also includes the study of form, style and meaning of literary works.

RELATION BETWEEN ‘ BASE’ AND ‘ SUPERSTRUCTURE’ :

Eagleton begins his discussion with the Marxist metaphor – “ Base and Superstructure” . Marx argues that productive force and social relation form the economic structure of a society. This economic structure was called “ BASE”. From this Base emerges Superstructure. It comprises certain forms of social consciousness like religion, ethical value , aesthetic theory. The ruling class uses this form of superstructure to legitimize its mode of economic production .

Marx called this strategy of ruling class as ideology. Art and literature are part of ‘ Superstructure’ . They are the product of complex relation between base and superstructure. Therefore if we want to understand literature , we must understand it as part of the total social process. This is where ideology works through literature and criticism needs to discover it. To illustrate this point Eagleton takes the example of “ King Lear” , “ The Dunciad” and “ Ulysses”. He argues that it is not enough to interpret the symbols in these works to study their literary history and the footnotes about sociological facts related to them. It is important to study the complex relations between these works and the world they represent. Eagleton asserts the importance of Marxist study of literature . This must not restricted to socio-economic and historical analysis but must also take into account the artistic / aesthetic aspects. Eagleton takes the example of “ Nostromo” and interprets the famous “ Placido Gulf Scene” in the form of Marxist point of view. It is brief but brilliant piece of Marxist criticism. Decond and Nostromo are shown isolated which is the symbol of pessimism in the mind of the author it is a ideological pessimism. This is the world view of western bourgeois of whom Conrad was one.



PROBLEM OF THE RELATION BETWEEN ‘ BASE’ AND ‘ SUPERSTRUCTURE’ :

Marx clearly points out that these two aspects are not symmetrical and therefore do not form equal relationship in order to explain this problem Eagleton takes the literary example of T.S. Eliot’s ‘ The Wasteland’ . He briefly shows the general Marxist interpretation of the poem. It may be argued that the poem is directly determined by ideological and economic factors. But this interpretation does not take into account the many levels that mediate between the text itself and capitalist economy . Eliot had very ambiguous relationship with English society as an aristocratic American writer. He was committed conservative traditionalist rather than a bourgeois commercialist and here Eliot does not use.

THE RELATION OF LITERATURE TO IDEOLOGY:

Eagleton defines ideology as the way men live out their roles in class-society . It binds people to their social function through values, ideas and images and prevent them from true knowledge of society . In this sense ‘ The Wasteland’ is ideological as it shows man making sense, experience which are false and prevent people from true social knowledge. The relation of literature to ideology is not simple and direct. Eagleton mentions here two extreme views about the relation –

- 1) All literature is nothing but the expression of ideology.
- 2) Literature transcends ideology and shows relations that ideology hides.

He rejects both these view and better understanding he cities Marxists theorist Louis Alhusser. According to him ideology and literature both represent in a imaginary ways in which man experience the real world. Literature is essentially a part of ideology and puts ideology in literat

CONCLUSION:

Eagleton makes it clear that Marxist criticism has not paid any attention to artistic form or formal feature of literature . Marx himself believed that literature sould level a unity of form and content . He criticized the extreme use of stylish techniques but he did not completely deny the form of literature. Greek classical art for example had achieved the unity of form and content. It may be stated that Marxist criticism sees a dialectical relation between form and content and believes finally in the primacy of content . Eagleton states that this Marxist view of dialectical relationship between form and content rejects the formalist view of art and ‘Vulgar Marxism’. Marxist criticism is not a single unified critical approach . It is a collection of various methods of literary / artistic analysis . Marxist critics have taken



different position in their analysis of literature but the central idea that run through their analysis is that literature is the product of historical, social and economic structures.

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