

LITERATURE AND IDEOLOGY: A SUBALTERN UNDERSTANDING**B. L. Raju**Department of English
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Sagar, Shivamogga, Karnataka, India.**Abstract**

This paper tries to locate ideology built into literature and attempts to put forward the argument that literature can never free itself from the ideological positions. Ever since man evolved his literary sensibility and its expression, he started writing either against or in favour of his contemporary political and cultural positions of the contemporary times. In the act of writing, the writer gets trapped into ideology that has never been politically innocent. After Karl Marx and Fredric Engels specified the term ideology, the writers' fraternity to defend and counter their belief system in the epistemological pursuits has extensively used it. Those who were, as Marxism argued, in possession of the material production, used the superstructures like literature to proliferate the ideology of keeping their interests intact. The subalterns who have entered into the class and caste struggle with the dominant across the world are now taking up literature ideologically as a means to liberate themselves and ensure social justice to all in their politics and poetics.

Keywords: *Normative Ideology, Significations, Social Consciousness, Subordination, False Consciousness, Sensibility, Subjection, Hierarchy, Cultural Hegemony.*

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Writing is the most essentially democratic process and it happens in its true sense only in the secular ambience. In other words, writing should ever ensure its faithfulness to democracy and its spirits. In turn, democracy shall guarantee the autonomy and agenda of writing. There is a kind of mutual solidarity and understanding between them. Now a few crucial questions have emerged to the centre stage; should and can literature be neutral to ideology?, had literature ever been neutral to ideology?, who write literature and on behalf of whom?, whose service is literature at? . The answers to these questions are categorically thought provoking. Literature is an art; but it cannot be neutral to socio-political and cultural influences, because it has been ever been in favour of the privileged. As a superstructure, literature should have been inclusive in its approach and address the structural reality that has been discriminatory on part of the subordinates. Contrarily, it had engaged in upholding the dominant and silencing the oppressed and consolidating the powerful.

Ideology is one of the most important conceptual categories that have affected the corpus of epistemology for the last two hundred years. It is a very important term used frequently in the field of politics, cultural studies, literary studies, film studies etc. The *Cambridge Advanced Learners Dictionary* published in 2008 defines ideology as “a theory or a set of beliefs or principles, especially one on which a political system, party or organization is based (713). Frank Kermode, a well-known critic of power and culture, traces the roots of ideology in the history. He confirms, “figurations, usually of an ideological origin whether acknowledged or not, will be found in history as well as in the history like” (Kermode, 231-38)

In the above backdrop, one would note that ideology is a set of body of ideas and interests of a group of dominant people who circulate those ideas to be normative, valid and legitimate for the rest of the society. Nevertheless, Linda Hutcheon, in her book *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory and Fiction* acknowledge the role of art (178-84). She states, ideology both constructs and is constructed by the way in which we live our role in the social

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totality and by the way we represent that process in art". In other words, as Karl Marx and Fredric Engels put it "ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideasThe class which has the means of material production at its disposal, has control at the same time over the means of mental production"(58-61). Both the political philosophers observe that ideologies and material productions are interdependent and those who have control over the material production, accumulation and distribution quite naturally control the ideology too. On the other hand, those who do not have power will just passively accept the ideology of the ruling class as normative ideology.

An influential paradigm, ideology carries many competing and contesting significations. It not just designates a collection of political, economic and social ideas, but also shows how there are many practices of mediation, modification, concealment or distortion of those ideas. Marx and Engels define the relationship between social structure and social consciousness as follows:

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 of 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 there correspond definite forms of social consciousness. The mode of production of material life conditions the social, political and intellectual life process in general (Marx and Engels, 3-7)

Both the revolutionary philosophers point out that the political superstructure can determinate the material forces which in turn define the consciousness of the people.

This can be further substantiated that ideology will be ever working in the interests of the ruling class and conceals the reality of domination of those in power. The dominant class do not see themselves as exploiters or oppressors; instead, they successfully convince and silence the powerless to live in the consciousness of the dominant and make them accept their own subordination. Even the subaltern fail to see themselves as oppressed or the most exploited. This process is well termed to be false consciousness' which reflects the expressions and ideas of the superstructure and hides the actual socio-economic status of the poor and their subordination. Marx and Engels in *The German Ideology* opine that ideology is a distorted or a false consciousness of the world that disguises people's real relationship to their world.

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However, Stuart Hall takes a different yet quite opposite position as for false consciousness is concerned. He says, ideology must not be considered a false consciousness or a kind of concealment, but rather as a multifaceted force in the struggle for cultural power carried on in the mode of production of meaning”(209-210). Hall optimistically speaks of false consciousness and recognizes its potential in the struggle for power.

The well known literary critic Ania Loomba extends the scope of the concept ideology stating that it does not, as is often assumed, refer to political ideas alone. It includes all our mental frame works, our beliefs, concepts and ways of expressing our relationship to the world (26-31). Hence, literature as a mental framework or a cultural product of the superstructure deems to be necessarily ideological to the extent of supporting the interests of dominant group that appropriates the entire social, political, economical rewards and ensure their cultural superiority in the society.

Karl Marx uses a phrase ideological forms (4-9) to refer to all the art and literary productions. An ideological form is an umbrella term verbalizing literature as something very much ideological and cannot be escaped from it. Marx and Engels emphasize, “it is not consciousness that determines life, but life that determines consciousness. In support of this perspective, Terry Eagleton argues thus:

all social practices including art exist by and in ideology and as such, ideology comes to mean the ways in which what we say and believe connects with the power structure and power relations of the society we live in (*Eagleton*, 12-19)

There has been so much of discussion as to what the relationship between literature and ideology is and how they mutually consolidate each other in their conflictual positions. These kinds of questions have been at the core of such discussion in connection with literature and politics. Every literature, as an art, creates and represents the consciousness of its contemporary times.

Louis Althusser takes a very positive connotation of literature and speaks of the peculiarity of art in terms of its ability to make us see, make us perceive, make us feel something which alludes to reality. What art makes us to see, and therefore gives us in the form of 'seeing,' 'perceiving,' and 'feeling' (which is not the form of knowing) is the ideology from which it is born, in which it bathes, from which it detaches itself as art, and to which it alludes" (217-222). For Althusser, art is thoroughly ideological; it is a form of ideological practice,

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grounded in the immediate, lived experience of subjects, yet somehow different from this ideological background.

In this way, a writer's sensibility is certainly subject to the pressure of an ideology and Marxism has strongly argued to that effect. Ideology of course will never fail to leave an indelible mark on the creative sensibility of a writer. A literary text cannot and will never be as independent of ideology and the textuality of history. Moreover, it is not proper to say that literature loses its autonomy just because its significations are ideological representations. Literature is a production of ideology. Terry Eagleton thinks that the literary text "defines, operates and constitutes that ideology in ways unpremeditated, so to speak, by ideology itself. He further remarks like this:

literature is the most revealing mode of experiential access to ideology that we possess the truth of the text is not an essence but a practice—the practice of its relation to ideology, and in terms of that to history. On the basis of this practice, the text constitutes itself as a structure; it deconstructs ideology in order to reconstitute it on its own relatively autonomous terms, in order to process and recast it in aesthetic production, at the same time as it is itself restructured to variable degrees by the effect of ideology upon it (Eagleton 98-103)

The crux of the entire argument is whether ideology as a false consciousness suppresses the reality for the subaltern or is it a liberating force on part of the writer and the subaltern community. The literary men of subaltern perspective always try to bring in the ideology into literature. They seek to consider, to discuss and to educate people in an indirect way concerning the most serious problems that the subalterns face today. Politics is certainly a great arena in which the fundamental bread-and-butter struggles of men, of groups, of nations, of social classes take place. He who is frivolous about politics is guilty of turning against to his fellow men, especially in times of deep social crisis. The problems of politics is basically, concerned with action and power. Literature moves to the rescue of the subaltern and enter into the political action.

Now we need to specify the concept of subaltern to locate and foreground subalternity politics and ideology in literature. Subaltern applies in various cognitive disciplines like history, anthropology, sociology, literature etc. The Oxford Dictionary gives the meaning of the term subaltern as an officer below the rank of captain, esp. a second lieutenant. A subaltern

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is a military term for a junior officer literally meaning “subordinate. Subaltern describes commissioned officers below the rank of captain and generally comprises the various grades of lieutenant. Antonio Gramsci, an Italian Marxist, popularized this term while writing to counter Fascism during 1920’s and 1930s and he substituted it for the proletarian class. Ranjit Guha explains further the meaning of this term in his preface:

the word ‘subaltern’...stands for the meaning as given in the Concise Oxford Dictionary, that is, ‘of inferior rank’. It will be used... as a name for the general attitude of subordination in South Asian Society whether this is expressed in terms of class, caste, age, gender and office or in any other way (v-vii)

Of course, the term subaltern is being used by the scholars for Dalits in India and the native aboriginals of African continent oppressed by the dominant in general focusing on the oppressive structures.

Now I try to focus on the caste categorization of the subaltern people in Indian context. Sathianathan Clark (6-9) remarks that the subordination and subjection that marks the life of Dalits in India bring them into the contours of a particularly contextual assembly of subalternity. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak argues that subaltern is not:

just a classy word for oppressed, for Other, for somebody who’s not getting a piece of the pie. In postcolonial terms, everything that has limited or no access to the cultural imperialism is subaltern – a space of difference. Now who would say that’s just the oppressed? The working class is oppressed. Its not subaltern. Many people want to claim subalternity. They are the least interesting and the most dangerous. I mean, just by being a discriminated-against minority on the university campus, they don’t need the word subaltern. They should see what the mechanics of the discrimination are. They are within the hegemonic discourse wanting a piece of the pie and not being allowed, so let them speak use the hegemonic discourse. They should not call themselves subaltern. (29-47)

The words subaltern and Dalit are used as synonyms in writings in general. There are similarities between these two terms. The Dalit movements popularized the term Dalit, coined by Jotiba Phule, one of the great social reformers of India. Both subaltern and Dalit indicate the subjectivity - objectivity and the superior - inferior differences in the socio-political and economic and cultural positions. The above-mentioned terms designate the people and their

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lower caste status in the social hierarchy against which Dalit protest movements emerged to fight against the ideology of the oppressive social hierarchical structures and discriminatory attitudes of the dominant sections.

Let me put it in simple words. Dalit literature is quite naturally ideological. The ideology of Dalits and their literatures resulted in the post Ambedkarite India has been resisting the ideology of the upper castes and their literary productions. Dr. B. R. Ambedkar was a champion of the ideology of social justice of India. Dalit literary aesthetics and its notion of ideology (103-135) have been interrogating the established hegemonic structures like caste hierarchy, its purity and pollution resulted in the stigma of untouchability in practice. He fought against the unequal political and economic order of the society, hierarchic epistemology, cultural hegemony, and its ideology on the one hand and on the other, speaks in favour of establishing equality, liberty and fraternity, social dignity and at last human dignity in the society. To conclude, the ideology of the literary aesthetics of Dalits aims at constructing their own independent identity politics and poetics.

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