

TERRY EAGLETON'S THEORY OF THE TRAGIC, REFLECTED ON CURRENT ARAB SOCIOPOLITICAL CONTEXT

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Abstract

Corona virus 2019 (Covid-19) pandemic of today is a real tragedy for it has taken the lives of millions of people worldwide regardless of their social, political and material status. This will absolutely change the minds of those with classic views of tragedy. It is said that the concept of tragedy has changed greatly since early modern ages, more specifically in the sixteenth century. Modern people are supposed to view tragedy in a different way the classical people viewed it. Having grief towards an ordinary person and not a king, a queen or a prince defines modern views of tragedy.

Terry Eagleton views the notion of tragedy differently, not only that, he rather redefines tragedy. The following paper would attempt to briefly engage with the following questions: why does Terry Eagleton come up with a new theory of the tragic? (in other words, what Terry Eagleton objects to in the earlier theories of tragedy?) What is his theory of the tragic? How is it relevant to our own world? Since Eagleton calls for a 'planetary' theory of tragedy that confronts global politics, a theory that connects art and life, I will apply some of his 'interesting' ideas to the contemporary situations the Arab world lives today, more specifically to the latest revolutions against some Arab tyrannical regimes.

WHY A NEW THEORY OF TRAGEDY?

This section sketches out the main objections of Eagleton to earlier theories of tragedy. For instance, there are the views that tragedy is now dead in our 'post-tragic' era and that it is Judaism and Christianity that are responsible for its decline. Eagleton counters these arguments, among many other ones, and seeks to re-define tragedy in order to embrace the ordinary and the philosophical. In addition, he objects to the hierarchical view of tragedy as delineating the lives of the highborn over the ordinary and the oppressed. The definition of tragedy as that which ends sadly is still unsatisfying. Add to that, unlike traditionalists (e.g. George Steiner's *The Death of Tragedy*), radicals (like Bakhtin) believe that it is no longer desirable.

According to Graham Ward, Steiner in his book *The Death of Tragedy* follows a line of thought that perceives Judaism and Christianity as

inimical cultural settings for the production of tragedy (as an art) (100). Steiner believes Christianity is inimical to tragedy because it determines that "the ways of God to man are just" (4). This decline of tragedy may be viewed as a paradigm for the decline of high culture and serious art. In the opening pages of *The Death of Tragedy*, Steiner states that Judaism is alien to tragedy, and yet at the very end of the book, in the 'Epilogue', it is a specifically Jewish tragedy that he is outlining (qtd in Ward 100).

In *Sweet Violence: The Idea of the Tragic*, Eagleton argues that "it is [...] a mistake to believe with George Steiner that Christianity is inherently anti-tragic" (1). In his 'Introduction', Eagleton is explicit about his aim: 'there are theological ideas that can be politically illuminating, and this book is, among other things, an exploration of them' (1).

Eagleton undertakes the ambitious task of freeing tragedy from generic constraints

perpetuated by much tragic theory. For Eagleton the teleology of tragedy rises above the prescriptions of genre to embrace both the ordinary ("there are those for whom the exceptional [high tragedy] is the quotidian norm") (11) and the philosophical ("The most renowned tragic teleology is that of Hegel") (41). The "many sided ambitiousness" of tragedy, from Eagleton's point of view, negotiates multiple relationships—tragedy and classical Marxism, tragedy and philosophy, tragedy and tragic theory, tragedy and Christian humanism, tragedy and cultural theory, tragedy and literature.

As Ward notes, Eagleton begins by challenging conventional tragic theorists, postmodernists, and liberal culturalists. Of the three, Eagleton devotes the most attention to dismantling and exposing the false consciousness of most conventional theories of the tragic, which according to Eagleton have either ignored or underplayed the radical elements of tragic practice (101).

For Eagleton, Steiner is ignorant of the "immanent" connection between tragic art and real tragedy. Also, the gulf that Eagleton is at pains to point out is between highbrow tragic theory and radical tragic practice.

In a review of Eagleton's *Sweet Violence*, the playwright, Howard Brenton, argues that Eagleton succeeds in breaking free from the doomed search for the holy grail of literary criticism, a definition of tragedy (Brenton par. 6). Consider what seems to be a reasonable definition: "All tragedies end in catastrophe." Though that can be seen to be true of *King Lear*, it is certainly not true of the *Oresteia*, which actually ends happily with a democratic resolution of the play's pain. It is also not true of *Macbeth* which ends happily with the restoration of monarchy to the rightful Malcolm.

Eagleton argues that the two warring views of tragedy, the traditionalist's represented by George Steiner in *The Death of Tragedy*, and the radicals represented by Mikhail Bakhtin (the great writer on art as carnival) are fighting on the same ground. The difference is that conservative critics believe, along with Nietzsche, that tragedy has died since we no longer believe in fate and the gods. The conservatives have concluded that

tragedy is no longer possible while the radicals have concluded it is no longer desirable.

It is from this point that Eagleton launches his new theory of tragedy. As Ward observes, he relishes appropriating a slew of concepts usually shunned by the left because of a fear of metaphysics, and works them into a view that tragedy did not die in the twentieth century, but mutated into modernism (Ward 100). There is a tragic predicament at the very center of contemporary Western culture.

Deanna Thompson reviews that Eagleton's first chapter, "A Theory in Ruins," tries to somehow come up with a suitable definition of the tragic, "only to toss them all into the rubbish heap before exploring various elements of tragedy in the remaining chapters" (56). Thompson adds that Eagleton presents repeated, very careful detailed reviews of a whole range of theories regarding the parameters of the tragic including the roles that agony, fear, pity, pleasure, freedom, fate, and the demonic play within tragedy. She further thinks that Eagleton might wanted "radical" theorists to embrace tragedy as an enduring category. She maintains that although religion is not a prominent theme throughout Eagleton's book, Eagleton puts the blame on theorists of not adequately appreciating the cultic origins and the continuing religious dimension to tragedy as an art form. He arrives to the conclusion that modernity itself bears within the tragic element, and that "a conservative, sophisticated view of the tragic still serves us well today, both in the realm of theory and the realm of real life" (57).

According to John Osborn, Eagleton objects to a certain hierarchical view of tragedy. He exposes the major ambivalent of the anti-tragic debate: we object to tragedy as an oppressive ideology that places the highborn above the low, the individual above the group, the law above justice; but can we not use this term to describe what afflicts powerless individuals and oppressed groups (129)?

For Suzanne Gossett, too, in *Sweet Violence* Terry Eagleton argues against conservative views of tragedy as "ascetic, elitist, sacrificial, hierarchical, anti-rationalist, spiritually absolutist, hostile to modernity" (Eagleton 272). In his first chapter, "A Theory in Ruins," he methodically

attacks such views, using Dorothea Krook's *Elements of Tragedy* (1969) as representative, but his object is more generally the (re)reading of Aristotle which views tragedy as uplifting, admires its heroes, and ignores the havoc and suffering they cause and undergo.

Eagleton has apparently absorbed the entire Western philosophical tradition as well as tragedies from Aeschylus to John Arden, and tosses off comments like "it is tragic *theory* which has struck heroic postures, not tragic practice. It is Hegel and Holderlin, not Ben Jonson and Edward Bond, who are entranced by an ideal of purity" (Eagleton 73). This quote exemplifies one of Eagleton's main objections to his predecessors, namely that "many general theories of tragedy have been spun out of a mere two or three texts" (43). He traces the history of these theories from Hegel to Beckett, and then in chapters entitled "Heroes," "Freedom, Fate and Justice," and "Pity, Fear and Pleasure" deconstructs the major elements of the traditional definitions strand by strand.

Debates about Christianity and tragedy concern more than the meaning of Christianity; they also concern the inscrutable meaning and the peculiar value of tragedy, and of the time-after-time called post-modernity. For Steiner, tragedies paint a world in which rationality does not reign supreme and in which "there is nothing democratic" (Eagleton 231). The world of tragedy, in Steiner's view, was hierarchical, and within this world everything from earth to heaven was connected. Indeed, the loss of common meanings and public art forms is for Steiner a main reason for the demise of tragic literature in modernity.

Terry Eagleton's disagreement with Steiner concerns, among other things, the meaning of modernity and the prospects for meaning after modernity. As Suzanne Gossett observes, he faults Steiner and other opponents of tragedy for opposing modernity's salutary products, in their apparent preference for hierarchy over equality, fate over freedom, suffering over progress.

Similarly, in "Tragedy, Theology, and Feminism in the Time After Time", Kathleen M. Sands argues that "in literary circles, there has been a renewed sense of the tragic, a lament for a sensibility that seems to have gone missing in

modernity" (41). Recently, a consensus has emerged in the academia that the regression of tragic literature is lamentable. Yet, there is disagreement, especially between Terry Eagleton and George Steiner, over whether Christianity, along with modernity, is partly responsible for this decline. However, the underlying cause of this disagreement is a less clear disagreement about the meaning and special value of the tragedy itself. What is the tragedy, or more precisely, what should it be? What is good in its resurrection?

According to David Sampson, the elitist view of tragedy for him is the work of literary critics and never the work writers. That is because the critics are the ones who are fully convinced of the moral dignity and social significance of suffering and death in ordinary life. It is the critics who underestimate the appropriateness of modern life to the tragic situation, create an aesthetic virtue from suffering in the past, and convince themselves that what was terrible in the past can be metaphysically pleasing today and that present suffering is not offensive and uninteresting (par.2).

EAGLETON'S THEORY OF THE TRAGIC AND THE ARAB-ISLAMIC WORLD

On November 10, 2008 Eagleton delivered the Edward Said Memorial Lecture, "Terror and Tragedy," at the American University in Cairo. Here is a brief account of the main interesting 'radical' ideas about tragedy and our contemporary post-9/11 world that he discussed in the lecture:

Unlike mainstream critics of the Islamic world, Eagleton observes that the word 'terrorism' is of a recent 'Western' origin; it first was referred to the state terrorism, like that which the US and Israel are practicing.

This reminds one of a book by Ian Buruma and Avishai Margalit entitled *Occidentalism: The West in the Eyes of its Enemies* which argues that Occidentalism is an old phenomenon that is rooted in the Western soil because critiques of the city as symbolizing secularism, individualism, cosmopolitanism, and the power of money have been expressed by nineteenth century German counter-Enlightenments Romanticists (Bilgrami 388).

Eagleton interestingly links law, terrorism, and Western modernity. Modernity is an exclusionist tool that is the root of all the fascist regimes. The American law, for example, replaced one of the rights legitimized by the French revolution with the absolute right for happiness. And it is at times that we are the law's own victims, though we 'desire' law and order. He sees a strong relation between law and death. It is, for him, a man wearing the clothes of a woman. It can also be a woman wearing the clothes of a man. This means that it is male and female at the same time, strong and attractive at the same time. Here Eagleton quotes Gramsci that law has to frighten but seduce at the same time. This desire for law and the right for happiness is sometimes fatal, Eagleton argues. It is a desire which eventually kills itself. The absolute right in happiness and the absolute freedom eventually reaches a state of non-existence. It is a desire manifested in stereotyping the other.

Here Eagleton illustrates the point with Macbeth and Lady Macbeth in that the infinite desire leads Macbeth to kill all around him on the request of his wife – which eventually leads to his own death.

The interesting argument to me is that this similarity is not only literary but political. Eagleton argues that the Americans know themselves by the Other – they are the enemies of the Russians. But when the USSR collapsed, Islam was the alternative enemy. He further notes that there are three Western tragedies that shaped the Western stereotypical and tyrannical imagination: Oedipus, Faustus, and King Lear. In all the three texts, the heroes face themselves.

In the conference, Eagleton briefed his Arab audience about his recent book *Holy Terror*. Eagleton does not use clichés about Islam that many people like Samuel Huntington used, like 'Islamic barbarism' 'Arab irrationality' etc. Instead he goes back to the Western tradition especially tragedy (from Greek tragedy to Shakespeare's tragedy to the modern Western novel) with its ideas on God, absolute freedom, infinite profit, as the root of radical violence. Western tragedies contribute to shaping a violent West. He interestingly and radically argues that suicide bombers are the byproduct of the West itself. For he sees a relation between the

campaigns for combating terrorism and terrorism itself: terrorism is a result of those campaigns. This is true for Eagleton when we remember the desire of the West to annihilate itself (self-destruction). From the cunning Iago in *Othello* to Fagin, the children kidnapper in *Oliver Twist*, to those who committed the holocaust, Eagleton deals with 'tragic evil' in human history beginning with the Greek myths.

Eagleton asks: why do we see evil more attractive (as in the case of Dracula, ghosts, demons and monsters)? He argues that the middle class is responsible for this type of thinking by making virtue an ordinary boring ideal. According to him, this exists in the English novel which makes virtuous people naive victims of a powerful clever evil.

But such evil is in reality weak. When you see the trial of Adolf Eichmann, you would feel pity for him as he appears surprisingly weak. He wanted to be treated as an employer not a murder professional.

Here Eagleton differentiates between two types of evil: the normal evil and the absolute evil; Eichmann belongs to the second. The holocaust, Eagleton argues, is an absolute evil because it is evil for evil itself, whereas the practices of the Islamic fundamentalists are normal evil which could have been avoided if the West understood their objections. Evil people for him are those who cannot enjoy life, who get their feeling of life from killing others, who have the desire to destroy. They are sadists.

I do not find any better example in our contemporary Arab world that matches with Eagleton's views of tragedy than the killed Libyan ex-president Moammar Gaddafi who has murdered thousands of Libyans during his life time just for opposing him. Gaddafi led a famous historical bloodless revolution in 1969, a coup that overthrew King Idris of Libya. Libyans considered Gaddafi as a national hero and appointed him to be in charge of the country. Gradually as years passed, Gadhafi and his comrades became ruthless and repressive towards all who criticized them. *In the Country of Men*, the English novel written by the Libyan writer Hisham Matar, is the best fiction so far that clearly pictures Gadhafi's repressive regime. The Revolutionary Committee men (who represented

the police during Gaddafi's reign) used to roam the cities, break into people's houses, pursue individuals, interrogate citizens, crackdown university students, detain activists and execute dissidents. Gaddafi, as a result, had a share in the recent Arab revolutions (known academically and politically as Arab Spring 2011) and he was dramatically killed by a furious mob.

What I want to show here is that what happened to Gaddafi is considered by many people a tragedy. Other people sympathize with Gaddafi because of the way he was killed after NATO helped the Libyans revolutionists to capture Gaddafi using air forces, an action that NATO selectively did only with Libya though several other Arab countries were undergoing similar political situations. While Gaddafi's death captured great global attention, death of thousands of ordinary people and activists under the same circumstances was greatly disregarded.

David Simpson argues here that the deaths of ordinary people have not accumulated a rhetoric of tragedy: Eagleton does return with approval to the arguments of Raymond Williams's *Modern Tragedy* (1966) where Williams told us that tragedy does indeed occur in the lives of ordinary people, that modern life is by no means devoid of exemplary suffering and death, and that the real tragedy of tragedy is that it could often have been avoided (Simpson par. 6). The thousands who, for example, were killed in Libya could have been saved had Gaddafi accepted the desire of his own people. The same thing applies with other Arab countries that underwent Arab Spring 2011.

In fact, this kind of connecting what we read about tragedy and our own situation is desirable and, I think, a must. This is what Eagleton calls for: a political study of tragedy, a study that brings back this relatively neglected form into the world of contemporary theory and politics. Tragedy's engagement with politics or history goes beyond the "contextually specific," instead highlighting the sheer persistence of conditions of oppression and suffering across historical eras. The cultural left has remained largely unaware of this aspect of tragedy, instead accusing it of a reductive trans-historicity; the postmodernists on the other hand have remained oblivious to the non-temporal aspects of identity, especially in non-Western nations.

Eagleton's *Sweet Violence* expands the register of tragedy. But as David Simpson notes this expansion or comprehensiveness sometimes goes too far. The idea of tragedy as possessing a significance that has far-reaching theoretical and political implications is certainly valid, but Eagleton ends up viewing almost every relevant philosophical concept as an example of the tragic mode (Simpson par. 5).

For Eagleton philosophy demonstrates a far more astute understanding of tragedy than literary criticism. Unlike literary criticism, philosophical theories of tragedy directly confront the big questions about tragedy's relations with history, religion, and politics. For Simpson, the problem begins when Eagleton moves from particular philosophical theories that explicitly deal with the tragic to an assertion of a large-scale theoretical paradigm for tragedy, which means a freewheeling insertion of tragedy into nearly every fundamental conception bequeathed by philosophy.

This view that tragedy should be more concerned with the realities of life than the lives of highborn kings or queens has also been expressed by Suzanne Gossett. She argues that in *Sweet Violence* Terry Eagleton is a meditation on what tragedy can mean in the modern world after the "mega-deaths" of the twentieth century (115). Those certain of "The Value of Agony" (the title of the second chapter) he indicts as guilty of a "high flown sadism." For Eagleton, tragedy requires a metaphysical, even theological investigation, raising questions of evil, of the presence or absence of cosmic order, of justice and freedom and the demonic.

An important strand in the book is the parallel it claims for Christianity and Marxism, both of which "take the common life seriously, yet trust to its potential transformation [...] It is the tragic which both Marxism and Christianity seek to redeem [...] by installing themselves at the heart of it (Eagleton 39-40)".

Early in the book Eagleton points out a fundamental linguistic elision of ideas, whereby the term tragedy refers "at once to works of art, real-life events and world-views or structures of feeling"(9), and throughout he moves back and forth between these three concerns.

Suzanne argues that Eagleton's purposes in redefining and re-evaluating tragedy are openly political; to trace "an improbable itinerary from the fertility cult to *political revolution*"(275). (*emphasis mine*)

In the final chapter of the book, entitled "Thomas Mann's Hedgehog," Eagleton invites those "on the left" to find a radical use for the concepts of suffering and self-abandonment developed in the tragedies of myth and religion. Examining at length the meaning and the many manifestations of the *pharmakos* or scapegoat (Oedipus, Christ, Lear; Mann's Gregorius, Hester Prynne, Bartleby the Scrivener), he argues that post-modern theory needs to look beyond its obsession with the abject and excluded to the constructive role of building a new social order.

Eagleton sees in tragedy a kind of hope for transformation and progress. He also hates the 'absolute' self-animating rights I mentioned earlier. According to Kathleen Sands, Eagleton repudiates absolutism of the hierarchical, authoritarian sort. Postmodernism represents a demonic, nihilistic negation of meaning, the opposite of the tragic, rightly understood. Tragedy, for Eagleton, tells of absolutes, but these are what could be called negative absolutes, absolute losses borne by the powerless, propertyless "losers" of history (46).

From this vantage point, the notion of innocent fault resembles nothing so much as a theology of victim-blaming. The point here is that in relation to the political revolutions I mentioned above, the masses not only suffer for the sins of the powerful but are blamed for those sins as well. It is like the logic of imperialism or colonization that Edward Said talked about in *Orientalism*: the West colonizes the Other who should be thankful to the West for colonization and should be blamed and punished if protested against the favour giving white man. This might be one of the negative effects of the globalization (or Americanization) of our own day.

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