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## MARXIST LITERARY THEORY AND ITS CONTEMPORARY RELEVANCE

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Crossref DOI - <https://doi.org/10.63665/rh.v7i1.19>

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### Abstract :

*This paper explores Marxist theory's vital role in literary studies, contrasting it with post-WWII approaches like formalism and structuralism, which prioritize language and text (Culler, 1997). Unlike these, Marxism stresses on social, economic, and historical forces shaping literature (Eagleton, 1996). From a Marxist lens, texts reflect class struggle, power dynamics, and material realities, not plain entertainment (Marx & Engels, 1998).*

*Fundamental concepts contain historical materialism, class conflict, and capitalism critique (Marx, 1990; Fiveable, 2025). The base-superstructure model postulates economic bases determining cultural superstructures like literature, which often reinforces ruling-class ideology (Marx & Engels, 1998; Eagleton, 1996). Marxist criticism thus uncovers how texts propagate or challenge inequality.*

*Examples include Orwell's "Animal Farm", Fitzgerald's "The Great Gatsby", Dickens' "A Tale of Two Cities", and García Márquez's "One Hundred Years of Solitude", all exposing class tensions. Marxism's relevance persists amid economic crises, wealth gaps, monopoly capitalism, and consumerism (Wani et al., 2018; Singh, 2024; Oxfam, 2023).*

*In sum, Marxism links literature to real-world conditions, positioning it as a catalyst for social awareness and change (Eagleton, 1996; Musto, 2012).*

**Keywords :** Marxism, Marxist literary theory, class struggle, base and superstructure, contemporary relevance

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Literary theories that emerged after World War II are notable for their rigid focus on textual and linguistic features. Although literary criticism has existed since Classical Greek times, post-war approaches such as formalism and structuralism emphasized language over social context (Culler, 1997). Marxist theory, in contrast, foregrounds material conditions and historical forces as central to literary production (Eagleton, 1996).

Literature reveals the spirit of its time and reflects the social issues that matter to people. From a Marxist perspective, literature is not simply a source of pleasure or escapism



but a manifestation of class struggle (Eagleton, 1996). Marxism achieved global influence because it was both a product of its historical moment and a theory capable of transcending it (Musto, 2012).

Karl Marx's major works, particularly *The Communist Manifesto* (1848) and *Das Capital* (1867), laid the foundation for Marxist thought. Marxism critiques the capitalist mode of production by highlighting labour exploitation, alienation, and class conflict between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat (Marx & Engels, 1998; Marx, 1990).

### **Research Objectives :**

The primary objective of this study is to examine Marxist theory as a critical framework for literary analysis and to highlight its relevance in understanding literature as a product of social, economic, and historical conditions (Eagleton, 1996). The research aims to analyse how core Marxist concepts—such as historical materialism, class struggle, and the critique of capitalism—inform literary interpretation (Marx, 1990). Another objective is to demonstrate how Marxist literary criticism varies from post-World War II approaches like formalism and structuralism by foregrounding material realities rather than linguistic sovereignty (Culler, 1997). The study also seeks to illustrate the application of Marxist criticism through literary texts, particularly allegorical works such as George Orwell's *Animal Farm* (Orwell, 1945). Finally, the research aims to assess the contemporary relevance of Marxist theory in light of modern economic crises, globalization, and growing inequality (Wani et al., 2018; Singh, 2024).

### **Core Concepts of Marxist Theory :**

Marxist theory revolves around several core concepts, including historical materialism, dialectical materialism, class struggle, and the critique of capitalism (Marx, 1990; Lotus Arise, 2023). These interconnected concepts explain societal evolution through economic forces rather than ideals. Historical materialism postulates that material conditions and economic relations form the foundation of social institutions and cultural practices (Marxology, 2024; Wikipedia, 2024). According to Marx, class struggle serves as the engine of historical change, ultimately leading to the transformation of social systems (Marx, 1990).

### **Historical Materialism :**

Historical materialism views history as driven by material conditions of production, not ideas or divine will (Marx, 1990). The economic base—modes of production like tools, labour, and resources shape the superstructure of laws, politics, culture, and religion (Marx & Engels, 1998; Dhemaji College, 2026). Changes occur when productive forces clash with outdated relations, driving society from feudalism to capitalism and beyond (Fiveable, 2025).

### **Dialectical Materialism :**

Dialectical materialism adapts Hegel's dialectics to the material world, emphasizing



contradictions as the engine of change (Lotus Arise, 2023). It postulates the unity and struggle of opposites within systems such as capitalism, where tensions between technological development and ownership structures generate transformation (Marxology, 2024). This method analyses reality scientifically, rejecting idealism for empirical economic processes (Marx, 1990).

### **Class Struggle :**

Class struggle is history's motor, pitting exploiting classes against the exploited (Marx & Engels, 1998). In capitalism, bourgeois owners extract surplus value from proletarian wage labourers, fostering antagonism and periodic crises (Marx, 1990). This conflict intensifies issues such as overproduction and unemployment, culminating in revolutionary change (Wani et al., 2018).

### **Critique of Capitalism :**

Marx critiques capitalism for its inherent contradictions: it generates wealth through alienated labour while simultaneously producing inequality and instability (Marx, 1990). Surplus value is appropriated by capitalists, leading to declining wages, recurring crises, and social polarization (Stone Center, n.d.). Ultimately, capitalism's drive for accumulation contains the seeds of its own collapse (Musto, 2012).

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

Central to Marxist theory is the base–superstructure model. The base consists of the forces and relations of production, including labour conditions, property relations, and the organization of work (Marx & Engels, 1998). The superstructure includes culture, ideology, political institutions, and the state, all of which are shaped by the economic base (Eagleton, 1996).

Marxist theory assumes a close relationship between the base and the superstructure, meaning that cultural forms such as literature cannot be understood independently of the economic system in which they are produced (Oxford Academic, 2024).

Literature, Ideology, and Class: Marxist literary theory views literature as part of the superstructure and argues that cultural production is inseparable from material conditions (Eagleton, 1996). Literary texts emerge from specific historical and economic contexts and often reflect the ideology of the ruling class (Historical Materialism, n.d.).

From a Marxist perspective, literature functions as a carrier of ideology that legitimizes existing power structures. Therefore, Marxist criticism seeks to uncover how literary texts represent, reinforce, or challenge class relations and economic realities (Gilliam Writers Group, 2024).

### **Marxist Literary Analysis :**



Marxist literary analysis focuses on class conflict, power relations, and social inequality within texts (Eagleton, 1996). This approach often adopts a sympathetic stance toward the working class and critiques the dominant ideology embedded in literary works.

George Orwell's *Animal Farm* is frequently analysed through a Marxist lens as an allegory of class struggle and ideological betrayal (Orwell, 1945). The novella illustrates how revolutionary ideals are corrupted when new ruling elites replicate the exploitative practices of the old regime (StudyCorgi, n.d.). Orwell exposes how ideology and propaganda are used to justify inequality and maintain control in allegedly egalitarian societies (IRF, 2021).

### **Criticism and Limitations of Marxist Theory :**

Despite its wide influence, Marxist theory has been subject to significant criticism. One major criticism is its tendency toward economic determinism, which may reduce literature to a reflection of economic structures (Eagleton, 1996). Critics argue that this model neglects individual creativity, aesthetic autonomy, and psychological depth.

Another limitation lies in Marxism's traditional emphasis on class struggle, which critics claim overlooks other axes of identity such as gender, race, sexuality, and colonial history (Oxford Academic, 2024). The collapse of socialist states in the late twentieth century further contributed to skepticism about Marxism's political predictions (Musto, 2012). Contemporary Marxist critics, however, have responded by integrating feminist, postcolonial, and cultural theories (Gilliam Writers Group, 2024).

### **Importance of Marxism in Modern Literary Studies :**

Marxism remains influential in contemporary literary studies because it connects literature to material conditions of power, labour, and wealth (Singh, 2024). In an era of neoliberal globalization, corporate dominance, and widening inequality, Marxist criticism helps reveal how texts expose or conceal exploitation and commodification (New Labor Forum, 2015).

A Marxist reading of F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* highlights class divisions between old wealth and new money, exposing the American Dream as an ideological myth that sustains inequality (Fitzgerald, 2004). Similarly, Charles Dickens' *A Tale of Two Cities* portrays class oppression and revolutionary upheaval, raising questions about social justice and historical change (Dickens, 2003).

Marxism has evolved by incorporating insights from feminist and postcolonial studies, enabling analysis of migration, precarious labour, and cultural resistance (García Márquez, 2006). This adaptability allows Marxism to remain relevant in analysing contemporary literature addressing global capitalism and systemic inequality (Musto, 2012).

### **Contemporary Relevance of Marxism :**



Global crises such as the 2008 financial collapse and the COVID-19 pandemic disproportionately affected working-class populations, exposing structural weaknesses in capitalism (Wani et al., 2018; Singh, 2024). These events renewed scholarly interest in Marxist analysis of inequality and exploitation (Stone Center, n.d.).

The rise of monopoly capitalism, evident in multinational corporations dominating markets, reflects Marx's prediction of capital concentration (Singh, 2024). Oxfam's reports confirm extreme wealth accumulation among elites, reinforcing Marxist critiques of inequality (Oxfam, 2023).

Consumer culture further illustrates Marx's concept of commodity fetishism, where social relations are obscured by market exchange (Marx, 1990; New Labor Forum, 2015). Digital platforms and advertising promote consumption while concealing exploitative labour practices (Dalvoy, 2019).

### **Conclusion :**

Marxist theory continues to provide a vital framework for analysing capitalism, class divisions, labour exploitation, and cultural production (Musto, 2012). Despite sustained critiques, its enduring relevance lies in the persistence of the social and economic inequalities it seeks not only to explain but also to challenge (Wani et al., 2018). As both an explanatory framework and a call to action, Marxism remains deeply engaged with the structures shaping the contemporary world.

Within literary studies, Marxist theory extends this critical function by situating literature within material conditions and ideological struggle. By grounding literary texts in their economic and historical contexts, Marxist literary theory rejects the notion of literature as an isolated aesthetic object and instead positions it as an active participant in social awareness and transformation (Eagleton, 1996). Literature thus becomes a site where class relations and ideological conflicts are revealed, contested, and potentially reshaped.

In conclusion, Marxist theory remains a powerful and indispensable tool for understanding the interconnectedness of society and literature. Its capacity to expose structural inequalities and to interpret cultural production as a form of social intervention ensures its continued significance in both critical theory and literary analysis.

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