

SOCIAL CLASS DISCRIMINATION AND LABOR EXPLOITATION OF MIGRANT WORKERS: A MARXIST ANALYSIS OF ZADIE SMITH'S SHORT STORY THE EMBASSY OF CAMBODIA

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ABSTRACT

This research paper offers a Marxist literary critique of the exploitation of labor, social class dynamics, and economic inequality as they are shown in Zadie Smith's short story *The Embassy of Cambodia*. The story illustrates the struggles of Fatou, an immigrant domestic helper employed by an affluent family in London, and highlights the glaring differences in class, ethnicity, and citizenship. This paper try to make clear Smith's works about social critique of systemic injustices under capitalism by employing Marxist ideas like class dynamics, class struggle, labor exploitation, ideological conditioning, cultural hegemony, and socio class discrimination. Through an attentive text analysis based on Marxist theory, this research paper particularly reveals how the conditions of inequality, alienation, and exploitation shape the relationship between the characters and the power structure of society. In addition, the researcher attempt to explain the implicit critique of capitalist ideology in the process of rationalizing injustices against marginalized groups. The proposed contribution is a new look at the complex social aspects of Smith's acclaimed contemporary fiction.

Keywords : marxist; economic disparities; social class dynamics; labor exploitation; class struggle; cultural hegemony; systematic inequality; capitalism

Introduction

Literature has an important role in shaping our own identities (Rahmawati, 2023). Literature frequently provides essential messages relevant to human life and establishes the value of a humanity (Rahmawati, 2020). The government concerned about how humanity's exploitation of limited natural resources would not meet future generations' needs. Marxism classifies wealthy individuals as the bourgeoisie or upper classes and less affluent individuals as the proletariat or lower classes.

Marx contended that in the context of exploitation, which underpins the capitalist system, the primary origin of profit the driving factor in capitalist production which is the labor of workers for which they go unpaid. (Marx, K. 1849. *Wage Labour and Capital*, Vol. One, pp. 74-97). In the other hand, English novelist Zadie Smith addresses the complexities of a diverse society, in the short story "*The Embassy of Cambodia*," (2013) she explores the social inequality in London.

These challenges manifest through the portrayal of a female immigrant experiencing unequal, second-class citizenship in a diverse environment, grappling with her sense of otherness and dual identity, facing an ambiguous social status, and encountering the ambivalence of natives towards her, including microaggressions and the

failure to acknowledge her as an equal member of society (Lapon, 2013). According to the background mentioned above, the research problems in this paper are as follows:

1. How does the portrayal of socio-class discrimination in *The Embassy of Cambodia* reflect or challenge broader societal attitudes and power structures related to class inequality?
2. How are economic disparities portrayed in *The Embassy of Cambodia*?
3. How does *The Embassy of Cambodia* depict labor exploitation?

Additionally, this research holds significance in its exploration of how Zadie Smith's literary work portrays socio-class discrimination against the protagonist, Fatou, and how this depiction reflects or challenges broader societal attitudes and institutionalized power structures that perpetuate class inequality. By analyzing the nuances of Fatou's experiences, the study can provide valuable insights into the ways in which literature can serve as a powerful medium for examining and critiquing social injustices related to class discrimination.

Methods

According to *Bogdan and Tylor's* definition of a qualitative method in Lexy J. Moleong's book, this study uses a process that yields descriptive data from participants in the form of spoken or written words as well as observable behaviours. By using this method, it seeks to identify a range of social problems, standard practices, and particular circumstances, such as the connections between behaviours, attitudes, and actions, as well as continuing processes and effects from natural phenomena that take place in a community.

Understanding occurrences connected to community activities is the goal of qualitative research. The essentials of the interaction between the researcher and the informants may be presented clearly through the use of qualitative approaches. Furthermore, qualitative approaches are more flexible and attentive to minute nuances. The technique wants readers to follow the story's progression and interact as though they were physically there.

This study fills a gap in the current literature by conducting an in-depth Marxist analysis of class inequality and labour concerns in this well-known work of modern fiction. Much of the available study on "The Embassy of Cambodia" focusses on issues of migration, diaspora, and cultural identity. While significant, the narrative's socioeconomic elements receive little analytical attention.

This study, which focuses on economic inequalities, social class, and labour exploitation, will give fresh insight on the complex mechanisms of inequality and worker abuse described in the novel. The study seeks to determine how specific examples of inequality and exploitation influence character connections and power systems. This Marxist approach will provide new academic insight into the text.

Result and Discussion

This research is viewed through a Marxist lens, and it shows a detailed representation of discrimination of a class, economic disparities, and labor exploitation in contemporary society. The sharp disparities between people of different social positions, such as the rich Derawal family and their domestic helper, Fatou, powerfully depict socio-class inequality in the novel.

Economic disparities is one of the key issues that could be seen by the contrast of opulent lifestyles with the insecure living situations of working-class figures. This is shown by the inconspicuous Embassy of Cambodia building in an upscale neighbourhood. The story also reveals the brutal reality of labour exploitation, notably how migrant workers like Fatou are treated by their employers, who withhold their pay and take their passports.

The narrative proficiently shows numerous aspects of conflict of a class, ranging from personal experiences to bigger society challenges. It focusses on how material conditions affect people's lives and prospects, as well as the role of prevailing ideologies in sustaining social inequality. Societal attitude and power structures are investigated through the characters' interactions and movement across various social places.

Prevalent societal norms that support exploitation and injustice are questioned in the narrative. From cultural alienation to economic marginalisation, it illuminates the processes of social exclusion. With its intricate plot and nuanced characters, "The Embassy of Cambodia" presents a powerful indictment of capitalist society and challenges readers to consider the power relationships and social systems that influence our world.

Furthermore, the story reveals how Smith goes beyond individual narratives to comment on broader societal issues, making it a relevant and thought-provoking work in the context of contemporary social and economic challenges. The story serves as a powerful tool for understanding and questioning the deeply rooted issues of class discrimination, economic disparities, and labor exploitation in our society.

Socio Class Discrimination

The social class discrimination in *The Embassy of Cambodia* is characterized by spatial segregation based on wealth, the contrast between institutional humility and private wealth, and the exclusion of workers like Fatou from bourgeois privilege, reflect a Marxist critique of capitalism that assumes that class hierarchies are reinforced by physical segregation, institutional complicity, and the systematic denial of resources to the proletariat.

Data 1: Wealth-Based Social Segregation

"Next door to the embassy is a health center. On the other side, a row of private residences, most of them belonging to wealthy Arabs (or so we, the people of Willesden, contend)." (Page 1) The sentence portrays a clear separation between the working class, represented by "we, the people of Willesden," and the bourgeoisie, represented by the wealthy Arabs. This distinction is based solely on socio-economic status, with the wealthy Arabs being identified as the privileged class, while the people of Willesden are depicted as the underprivileged class.

Data 2: Institutional Contrasted with Private Class Status

"The embassy, by contrast, is not very grand. It is only a four- or five-bedroom North London suburban villa, built at some point in the thirties, surrounded by a red brick wall, about eight feet high." (Page 1)

The sentence demonstrates how social class differences can be reflected in the physical form of buildings and properties, with the simple and unassuming embassy standing in contrast to the common perception of embassies as being associated with luxury and upper-class status.

Data 3: Exclusion of Laborers from Privileges

"It should be explained that it is Fatou's employers—and not Fatou—who are the true members of this health club; they have no idea that she uses their guest passes in this way." (Page 3) The sentence illustrates how social class discrimination operates in society, with Fatou's employers being identified as the privileged class and Fatou as the underprivileged class. It highlights the deep-rooted class consciousness and the recognition of the systemic inequalities that are inherent in a class-based society.

Economic Disparities

The economic disparities that occur in *The Embassy of Cambodia* is in the class stratification between Fatou's as proletarian labor and the Derawals' as wealthy bourgeois, the economic exploitation of could be seen through the Derawals' withheld Fatou wages and substandard living conditions, and the stark contrast between capitalist luxury and worker alienation exemplify Marxist critiques of capitalism, where systemic inequality thrives on the bourgeoisie's appropriation of labor value and the proletariat's disenfranchisement from resources and autonomy.

Data 1: Class Stratification

"Fatou, the protagonist, is a domestic worker for the Derawal family, who are wealthy enough to live in a large house and have a membership at a local health center." (Page 1)

The sentence encapsulates the core tenets of the theory of economic disparities, highlighting the stark contrasts in economic status, living conditions, and access to resources that exist between the upper class and the working class within capitalist societies, and the systemic factors that contribute to the perpetuation of these inequalities.

Data 2: Economic Exploitation

"Fatou's economic status is highlighted by her living conditions - she resides in a small room in the Derawal's house and her wages are withheld to cover her living expenses." (Page 2)

The sentence encapsulates the core tenets of the theory of economic disparities, highlighting the stark contrasts in living conditions and financial autonomy that exist between the upper class and the working class within capitalist societies, and the systemic factors that contribute to the perpetuation of these inequalities.

Data 3: Capitalist Luxury Contrasted with Worker Alienation

"The Derawal family, in contrast, is depicted as affluent, living in a large house and having the luxury of employing domestic help." (Page 3)

The sentence captures the fundamental ideas of the theory of economic disparities by emphasizing the sharp differences in privilege and wealth that characterize capitalist societies as well as the structural elements that support the continuation of these disparities between the capitalist and working classes.

Labor Exploitation

The labor exploitation in *The Embassy of Cambodia* manifested through physical and emotional abuse, systemic wage theft and autonomy deprivation, and the alienating devaluation of Fatou's labor which epitomizes Marxist critiques of capitalism, where the bourgeoisie enforces dominance by extracting surplus value, eroding worker dignity, and reducing proletarian labor to a disposable commodity.

Data 1: Physical and Emotional Exploitation

"Mrs. Derawal had twice slapped her in the face, and the two older children spoke to her with no respect at all and thanked her for nothing." (Page 5)

The sentence highlights Fatou's precarious situation in the Derawal family's home by illuminating the power disparity and mistreatment she experiences as a domestic servant. The disrespect and physical violence shown against Fatou by Mrs. Derawal and her kids is a prime example of the labor exploitation that is frequently present in capitalist systems.

Data 2: Wage Theft and Loss of Autonomy

"Fatou compares herself to a story she read about a Sudanese domestic worker described as a 'slave.' Fatou questions her own position, noting her restricted freedom, the Derawals' retention of her wages, and the lack of respect from the children. She reflects, "...she had not seen her passport since she arrived at the Derawals'... her wages were to be retained by the Derawals to pay for the food and water." (Page 7)

The sentence encapsulates Marxist labor exploitation theory by exposing the ways in which the bourgeoisie restricts the autonomy of the working class, maintaining control over both their labor and their basic freedoms, which perpetuates the systemic inequalities inherent in a capitalist society.

Data 3: Alienation of Labor

"'What you don't understand is that we have no need for a nanny,' she said, standing in the doorway of Fatou's room—there was not really enough space in there for two people to stand without one of them being practically on the bed. 'The children are grown. We need a housekeeper, one who cleans properly. These days, you care more about the children than the cleaning,' Mrs. Derawal added, though Fatou had never cared for the children, not even slightly. 'And that is of no use to us.'" (Page 16-17)

The sentence highlights how the working class is dehumanized and treated as merely a means to achieve certain goals within a capitalist system, this sentence encapsulates Marxist labour exploitation theory by highlighting the expendability and disposability of workers in relation to the demands of the bourgeoisie.

Class Struggle

The class struggle in *The Embassy of Cambodia* marked by spatial diversity reflecting unequal wealth distribution, domestic power dynamics enforcing worker subjugation, and marginalization fracturing the working class aligns with Marxist theory's assertion that capitalism sustains itself through fragmented class solidarity, hierarchical domination, and intra-proletarian divisions, all of which obstruct collective resistance against systemic oppression.

Data 1: Spatial Class Diversity and Unequal Wealth Distribution

"There is a house with a huge pink elephant on the doorstep, apparently made of mosaic tiles. There is a Catholic nunnery with a single red Ford Focus parked in front. There is a Sikh institute. There is a faux-Tudor house with a pool that Mickey Rooney rented for a season, while he was performing in the West End fifteen summers ago." (Page 5)

The sentence could be seen as representations of the stark contrasts and inequalities that exist within capitalist societies, where the opulence and excess of the bourgeoisie coexist alongside religious institutions, cultural diversity, and the more modest living conditions of the proletariat.

Data 2: Worker Subjugation and Domestic Power Dynamics

"Entering Asma's room, hearing nothing, assuming it empty, Fatou headed straight for the laundry bin in the corner... Asma punched the huge pile of clothes out of her hands. Fatou stooped to retrieve them." (Page 10-11)

The sentence captures Marxist class struggle theory by revealing how the power dynamics within a capitalist household perpetuate an entrenched sense of social superiority in the bourgeoisie, while the working class is resigned to an inferior, dependent role, illustrating the ongoing struggle between these classes.

Data 3: Marginalization within the Working Class

"Until that point, she had been envious of the Bengali boys on Via Nazionale. She felt that she, too, could paint herself green and stand still for an hour. But when she tried to find out more the Bengalis would not talk to her. It was a closed shop, for brown men only. Her place was in the bathroom stalls." (Page 12)

The sentence highlights the exclusionary practices and barriers faced by marginalized individuals within the working class itself, often dictated by factors such as race, ethnicity, and gender.

Class Dynamics

The class dynamics in *The Embassy of Cambodia* illustrated through upper-class opulence and social prestige, material deprivation reflecting proletarian dispossession, and power imbalances in resource access align with Marxist theory's critique of capitalism as a system that entrenches class hierarchies through unequal distribution of wealth, control over basic necessities, and institutionalized disempowerment of the working class.

Data 1: Upper-Class Opulence and Social Prestige

"There is a mansion called garyland, with something else in Arabic engraved below garyland... at any one time, garyland has five to seven cars parked in its driveway." (Page 6)

The sentence captures Marxist class dynamics theory by depicting the contrast in material wealth as a defining aspect of social hierarchy, where the possession and display of luxury items reinforce class distinctions and preserve the privileged status of the upper class.

Data 2: Economic Inequality and Class Deprivation

"Fatou said nothing. She was thinking that she did not have a proper suitcase and would have to take her things from Mrs. Derawal's house in plastic bags." (Page 16)

The sentence encapsulates the material deprivation, economic disparities, and systemic oppression experienced by individuals like Fatou, who belong to the working class within the capitalist system. It underscores the fundamental inequalities inherent in the distribution of wealth and resources, as described by Marxist theory's analysis of class dynamics and the exploitation of labor.

Data 3: Power Imbalance in Resource Access

"Fatou thought about that for a moment. Then she said, 'Can I please use the phone for one call?'" (Page 17)

The sentence captures Marxist class dynamics by illustrating how the working class's access to resources is mediated by the economic power and control held by the bourgeoisie, reinforcing dependency and maintaining a distinct boundary in privileges and autonomy between social classes.

Power Structures

The power structures in *The Embassy of Cambodia* marked by state-enforced dehumanization, bourgeois control over proletarian freedom, and ideological normalization of autocratic dominance align with Marxist theoretical frameworks that critique capitalism as a system reliant on institutional coercion, material dispossession, and ideological hegemony to perpetuate class hierarchies.

Data 1: State Power and Dehumanization

"'To keep you is no benefit. To destroy you is no loss' was one of the mottoes of the Khmer Rouge. It referred to the New People, those city dwellers who could not be made to give up city life and work on a farm." (Page 13)

The sentence encapsulates the extreme consequences that can arise when power is consolidated in the hands of a ruling class or party that perceives certain segments of the population as threats to their control, leading to dehumanization, oppression, and even genocide. It serves as a stark reminder of the importance of analyzing and addressing systemic power imbalances and inequalities to prevent such atrocities from occurring.

Data 2: Control over Personal Freedom

"For goodness' sake, girl, I don't have your passport! What would I want with your passport? It's probably in a drawer in the kitchen somewhere. Is that my job now, too, to look for your things?" (Page 17)

The sentence captures Marxist power structure theory by illustrating how the bourgeoisie can use control over essential resources to enforce dependency and limit the agency of the working class, maintaining a power imbalance that restricts social mobility and autonomy.

Data 3: Individual Power and Class Domination

"There's always somebody who wants to be the Big Man, and take everything for himself, and tell everybody how to think and what to do." (Page 17)

The sentence encapsulates Marxist power structure theory by illustrating how the ruling class monopolizes authority to preserve its influence and wealth, dictating terms that ensure the continued subordination and dependence of the working class.

Conclusion

A marxist analysis of Zadie Smith's short story *The Embassy of Cambodia* reveals an intricate portrayal of socio-class discrimination, economic disparities, and labor exploitation in contemporary issues in our society. Through the lens of Marxism theory, the research unveils how Smith's narrative effectively captures the complexities of class struggle, class dynamics, and power structure interrelated with the issues discrimination, inequality, and exploitation.

The research highlights several key findings:

1. Socio-class discrimination is vividly depicted through the stark contrasts between characters of different social standings, particularly between the wealthy Derawal family and their domestic worker, Fatou.
2. Economic disparities are a central theme, illustrated by the juxtaposition of luxurious lifestyles with the precarious living conditions of working-class characters.
3. Labor exploitation, especially of migrant workers, is exposed through Fatou's experiences, including the withholding of wages and confiscation of her passport.

This analysis demonstrates how Smith goes beyond individual narratives to comment on broader societal issues, making *The Embassy of Cambodia* a relevant and thought-provoking work in the context of contemporary social and economic challenges. The story serves as a powerful tool for understanding and questioning deeply rooted issues of class discrimination, economic inequality, and labor exploitation in our society.

In conclusion, this research contributes to the existing literature by providing an in-depth Marxist analysis of class inequality and labor issues in this acclaimed work of contemporary fiction. For the next researcher could filling a gap in this research which could focused on themes of migration, diaspora, and cultural identity to offers fresh insights into the complex mechanisms of inequality and worker exploitation depicted in the story.

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