

Gramsci's marxist analysis of short story “*Engine Trouble*” by RK Narayan.

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Abstract

This research examines R. K. Narayan's short story *Engine Trouble* through Antonio Gramsci's Marxist theoretical lens, arguing that dominant ideologies are not forcibly imposed on individuals but are subtly woven into cultural structures through language, institutions, and collective beliefs. This integration makes social inequalities appear natural, inevitable, or even invisible. Using critical concepts such as hegemony, commodification, the illusion of progress, and bureaucratic indifference, the study investigates how the characters either internalize, resist, or question the ideological forces shaping their lives. The analysis highlights how capitalist ideology commodifies human relationships, values, and even suffering, transforming them into objects of exchange and control. At the same time, the narrative exposes the deceptive promises of progress that keep genuine social transformation perpetually deferred. By tracing these mechanisms of ideological signification, the research reveals not only the pervasive weight of ideological control but also the small yet meaningful spaces within the text that allow for potential resistance, agency, and counter-hegemony. Ultimately, this study demonstrates that literature functions not merely as a passive reflection of societal structures but actively participates in shaping social consciousness. Through narrative strategies, symbolic representations, and character experiences, literature quietly instructs readers on how to live within existing social frameworks—or how to imagine alternatives beyond them.

Keywords: Gramsci, hegemony, commodification, illusion of progress, ideology, resistance.

INTRODUCTION:

In eighteenth century, when the world was struggling, and the meta-narratives were being introduced, another meta-narrative was introduced, which regarded that the whole world's wealth is accumulated in the hands of few people who own the means of production, and that they exploit the labour and working class. In every society power is not sustained by force. The most lasting power is built into culture through the ways people think. It is evident from history that dominant groups have maintained their position not simply by laws but by shaping the very beliefs and values of people by making them seem natural and normal. Ideologies once internalized render oppression invisible and acceptable and resistance unnecessary or impossible. The invisible process of domination is a central concern for researchers to understand how inequality persists in society.

Antonio Gramsci, a major figure in Marxist thought, offered one of the most influential explanations of this phenomenon through the concept of cultural hegemony. He argued that ruling class maintain their power not just by political or economic control but by constructing shared worldview.

In today's capitalist societies these mechanisms of control are more pervasive. Human's relationships, labor and cultural expression are commodified and stripped of their meaning. Meanwhile the narratives of social progress create an illusion and what else we can say in marxist terms as false consciousness, masking the oppressive structures. Bureaucratic institutions presented as neutral or benevolent enforce this order encouraging passivity and discouraging critical thought.

Literature often serves as a lens through which societal structures, economic systems, and class dynamics are reflected, critiqued, or reinforced. Marxist literary criticism, arising from the theories of Gramsci provides a framework for understanding how texts engage with the material and ideological conditions of their time. It emphasizes the role of economic systems and class hierarchies in shaping individual experiences and collective consciousness of society, offering insights into the ways literature interacts with broader social forces. By focusing on issues such as class struggle, economic exploitation, and ideological control, marxist analysis analyses the implicit power dynamics and material realities present within narratives. Marxist theory also analyses the struggles of working class and lower class against the powerful and wealthy bourgeoisie.

At a broader level, Marxist theory contends that cultural works are deeply intertwined with the economic base of society. Literature, as part of the superstructure, often reflects or challenges the ideologies of the dominant class. Through this lens, texts become sites of negotiation where the tensions between economic systems and human agency are played out, sometimes offering critiques of the current state of affairs and other times reinforcing it. The humour, irony, and conflicts presented in seemingly simple narratives often mask deeper social and economic commentaries.

R.K. Narayan's short story *Engine Trouble* offers fertile ground for Marxist analysis. Set in a small South Indian town, the story revolves around the protagonist's misfortunes after winning a road engine in a raffle. What unfolds is a satirical narrative that highlights the absurdity of material possessions devoid of utility, the economic struggles of the working class, and the unequal distribution of power and resources in a society governed by capital oriented structures.

By applying a Marxist lens to *Engine Trouble*, this study aims to explore how the story critiques the socio-economic conditions of its setting. The analysis will focus on how the protagonist's plight reflects the class struggle and havoc of poverty, inherent in a society marked by economic disparities and limited resources. Furthermore, it will examine how the narrative exposes the impact of capitalism on the weak and the burdens it places on the working class, revealing deeper critiques beneath its comedic surface. Through this approach, the research will demonstrate how Narayan's seemingly light-hearted tale functions as a commentary on the socio-economic realities of its time.

The framework used for this research, are the Gramsci's tenets, which are part of the Marxist theory and those tenets are to be analysed in this research

This research intends to find what are the struggles of labour class against the ruling class in this story? What are the havocs which are faced by the protagonist because of poverty? How money ends up as the problem of every solution? Towards the end of this research, I will find the answers to these questions.

Study Objectives:

Following are the aims of this research:

1. To find how hegemonic ideologies shape individual and collective consciousness of society as whole.
2. To investigate the commodification within capitalist societies
3. To investigate how the illusion and economic progress is constructed and maintained through cultural and institutional authorities

These are the objectives which are to be found, in the short story and towards the end of the research I intend to complete these objectives of research.

Research Questions

1. How does literature reflect hegemonic ideologies and false consciousness embedded in society?

2. How working class is reduced to mere commodity in a capitalist society?
3. How illusion of progress is maintained through bureaucratic authorities?

Methodology

The research design selected for this study is qualitative chosen to enable in depth exploration of Narayan's *Engine Trouble* using the framework of Gramsci. Being qualitative in nature, the research focuses on analyzing human behavior and experiences all of which are central to Gramsci's framework. It intended to give nuanced and detail analysis exploring multiple layers, meaning and interpretations. The data is collected by consulting various articles, websites and databases. The research is not rigid and hence open to more interpretations and multiple perspectives.

Literature review:

(Bashir et al., 2020), studied 'The Garden Party' written by Katherine Mansfield, by using the Marxist fulcrum in order to locate the hegemony of the upper class over the lower class. In this research the researchers applied "*Marxism to yield plurality of meanings embedded in it and to widen compass of this economic and political theory.*" (Bashir et al., 2020). The findings of this research are; analysis of the lower class and their exploitation at the hands of the upper class; how ideology plays a crucial role in empowering the status quo in the short story.

(Hendarsyah et al., 2021) conducted by Jelita Dewanty Hendarsyah Abdul Hannan EF, and Lili Awaludin examines the application of Antonio Gramsci's theory of hegemony to analyze the power dynamics and overthrow of Mufasa by Scar in the 2019 film *The Lion King*. Gramsci's theory of hegemony points to moral and cultural leadership instead of coercion. Gramsci theorized that power is potentially secure in the marginalized underclass when the underclass internalizes the values of the ruling classes. Gramsci illustrates the adoption of these ideologies of the ruling elite working within Scar's manipulation of the cultures and society of the members of the Pride Lands. Previous studies done by Irnawati (2019), Nursyahrifah and Adinda Putri (2016), and Rokhmansyah (2019), support the key concepts established in this paper as they all examine ways in which power relations, ideological authority, and social relations operate in different text forms and literary works. The study explores Scar's hegemonic behavior by examining Scar's alliances with the Hyenas, Scar's stories he creates against Simba, as well as Scar's tactical brinkmanship and caring about the Pride Lands and its people. The film clearly demonstrates Scar's rise to power was not due to force or coercion, but strategic persuasion through ideological beliefs and representations such as Simba. Gramsci illustrates some of these ideas about access to power through how the ruling elite must create a reality in the eyes of the governed as people consent to their power through this representation. Gramsci attempts to forward that the

ideas, constructions or representations put forth by Scar must create a world where power is predictable over time.

In Dickens' "Great Expectations," we see the overlap of class, economy, and individual identity. Using Eagleton's "Marxism and Literature" as a guide, Pip's pursuit of upward mobility emphasizes the alienation and dehumanization that accompanies capitalism. Likewise, Miss Havisham condemns the moral vacuity of wealth while Magwitch aims to subvert social hierarchies by accumulating wealth outside of the conventional British systems. Joe Gargery's struggles complicate this message while also demonstrating Marx's (1867) economic exploitation of the working class by showing how and why economic systems strip dignity away and reinforce inequality in classed societies. Furthermore, Dickens illustrates the gendered nature of class oppression, and the characterizations of Estella and Biddy emphasize how economic shortcomings limit women's class mobility. Fred Kaplan's biographical suggestions also encourage us to appreciate Dickens' unique critique of rational critique, where Dickens' own experience suffers with poverty connoted his socio-economic critiques motivated creative expression.

Various texts illuminate the powerful effects of economic and social oppression across a range of contexts. Anurudti Roy talks about caste oppression in post-colonial India, Dickens critiques class exploitation in Victorian England, and... Scholars like Eagleton and Grossberg and others reflect the global significance of class struggle and class exploitation, reinforcing a dialectical understanding of our contemporary moment. As Eagleton argued, Marxism offers the most useful method for understanding systematic oppression.

By applying Marxist analysis to these texts, scholars deepen their understanding of how literature critiques socio-economic systems, revealing universal patterns of class struggle and oppression across cultures and histories.

In this research I intend to apply the Marxist theory on this short story, because there are clear traces of Marxism in the story, but there is no existing literature on this short story regarding Marxist Analysis therefore, my research shall focus upon the Marxist critique of this short story.

Theoretical Framework:

One of the Gramsci's key ideas is the concept of hegemony that how one set of ideas dominate while drawing out other ways of thinking. Hegemony, he proposes, is not just imposed through force but woven into everyday life through culture, institution, religion etc. Some ideologies are created through intellectuals or political leaders while other comes up

through the people lived experiences. Over time those notions become so deep rooted that they seem natural making it incredibly hard for people to imagine any other way of living.

This research intends to find Marxist elements in the short story, the Engine Trouble by RK Narayan. The framework selected for this research is of Gramsci. In Marxism, there is a tug of war between the different classes, and the Gramsci's marxist critique focuses upon the class differences and class divisions.

I will use Gramsci's Marxists tenets as the guide for this research. Those tenets are; Gramsci's concept of cultural hegemony posits that ruling class maintain power and making everyone else to agree with it. They do so by controlling ideas, beliefs, traditions, religion or common sense. People give consent to this way because it seems natural and normal even if it keeps them oppressed.

1. Class struggle and bureaucratic indifference: For Gramsci class struggle is not just economic but also battle of ideas. The ruling class wins by spreading their own ideas. They are oblivious to the miserable condition of working class and demand conformity.
2. Commodification: Gramsci not only focuses on the economic aspect but ideological aspect of commodification. Under capitalist hegemony everything including values like success, happiness and identity are reshaped to fit the logic of consumption and profit.
3. Ilusion of progress: Gramsci believes that under capitalism progress is presented as universal which proposes that every improvement in society benefits all equally but in reality these developments serve the interests of ruling class and mask deep inequalities.

These selected elements would be analysed one by one from the text, by using qualitative analysis technique.

Data Analysis:

The protagonist of the story is a poor middle class man, who owns very limited resources and money. He goes to a fun fare and tries his luck in a raffle and he gets to win a road engine. But he didn't know how to drive the road engine and the municipality wanted that engine moved as soon as possible or they would charge him rent for the place. He was granted with a few days until the end of the fun fare. He inquires about the worth of the engine and a lot of people tell him that it is worth a lot of money and that it would help him make his fortune, he tries to move that engine out of the place, and for that purpose he goes to make deals with various people in order to sell the engine, but nobody is willing to buy it. Thus, the engine ends up staying there and municipality was charging him RS10 a month for

the rent of the place and the house in which he lived costed him only RS04 per month, thus his resources were draining out and he needed to do something. He hires an elephant from the temple and tries to move the engine with it. But he was sowing seeds for his downfall, the rope of the engine breaks and the engine, smashes the wall, thus he had a lot of debt on him and he had already drenched all of his resources in moving the engine. In the end, a person gets to pay the money for him because, the road engine falls into a well and the person wanted to close that well.

One finds that because of capitalism and commodification this person has to face a lot of problems and issues, that he even sends his wife and children to their parents and also had plans to go underground him as well. Now we shall analyse the selected tenets one by one from this short story in order to fulfil our research requirements.

1. Cultural hegemony

The protagonist wins an engine which seems to him like a dream or symbol of success. It is the society which teaches him that owning a big machine is equal to success and helps him in rising his status. He accepts without questioning it and believes that engine will upgrade his lifestyle. This concept corresponds with marxist concept that lower class are working class and they are *means of production* who are owned by *modes of production* (elites or bureaucrats). But instead engine becomes burden for him. He can't move it or sell or use it either. Different institutions like municipality, the temple authorities & police offer him no help and demand compliance. His suffering clearly shows hegemonic ideas making him accept his exploitation and failure and never questioning the system that creates it.

2. Class struggle and bureaucratic Indifference

The protagonist's encounter with bureaucratic entities shows class disparities. The municipal authorities' insistence on removing the engine without bothering for any kind of assistance shows institutional negligence and burden place on the lower class. Class difference is another important Gramsci's tenet. In this story, we find that the person who is the protagonist belonged to the lower class and he didn't have enough money which he could pay to move his own thing. Thus the ruling class demands capital from him in form of rent for leaving that engine in their owned place. Thus, the ruling class has become a capital oriented class and the protagonist belonged to the working class and he had limited resources, which he had already paid in order to move that engine. He didn't even have enough money to pay to the person who had brought that engine here to this fare as the writer says; **'The fellow who brought it here had to be paid a hundred rupees for the job and five rupees a day.'**(Narayan, 2006) Thus he decides to leave the engine there until, he gets another idea. The engine was placed on the municipality ground in the gymkhana and they wanted it to be moved as soon as possible or they would charge him RS10 a month. The class difference is again present there that a person who owns nothing has to pay even for the land where he has to place his engine and the ruling class who owns the resources and they are that much capital

oriented that they have forgotten everything and only want their pockets to be filled with the money, thus the protagonist ends up paying RS10 a month for the place. One finds that the house in which he lives costs him only RS4, and thus he is being ground in the grind of class difference. Where the elite and the ruling class own resources, and they have their minds tuned to only earning the money and for a person like this protagonist has to suffer.

Ultimately, he pays money to the temple and rents an elephant, who carries his road engine up the road, but to his misfortune the rope breaks and the engine goes to smash the wall of a house. He now had to pay a huge sum of money, the money he had to pay for the damage to that wall, the money he had to pay for the elephant, the money he needs to pay in rent for the place where the engine was staying. Thus, here he suffers because of poverty and class differences, that the upper class or the ruling class is only concerned with the money whereas, a middle class person cannot even enjoy the thing which he has won in the prize.

Thus, he wishes that he would leave this place and go underground and then one day an earthquake is there, and his road engine falls into a well, he goes there to look at it, but the engine isn't there, and then the owner of the well comes and requests him to let the engine stay where it is, because he wanted to close the well, but he was unable to close it and that now his engine was fitting in the well like a cork. That person agrees to pay all of the money and debt of the protagonist. Here, one finds that one person doesn't have enough money to move his prize and enjoy it, whereas, the other person has enough money that he is paying for the road engine, just because he needs to close the well, therefore, we find that in this short story there is theme of class difference and class difference is an important Marxist tenet and in this short story it is presented by Narayan in vivid details.

3. Commodification:

Commodification is another important aspect, we find in the story which is present throughout the story, that everything is taken in the commodity of money. Commodification is an important Marxist fulcrum, it locates, the exchange of money with anything. Commodification is present in this story. As we find that everything is taken in terms of money.

At first, he pays, money for participating in the raffle; **“Here for a ticket costing eight annas you stood a chance of acquiring a variety of articles-pincushions, sewing machines, cameras or even a road-engine.”** (Narayan, 2006) Now, here it is an exchange of a chance, of winning things in the place of money. The protagonist tries his luck, and he gets to win the road engine. But he had to yet move that engine out of the place. For that, he needed to pay money to a person who could do that, and he asks the showman for the person who brought it here, **“The fellow who brought it here had to be paid a hundred rupees for the job and five rupees a day.”**(Narayan, 2006) But this money was too much for him, thus, he doesn't get the services of the driver. Here one finds that, even the skill of the driver is commodified, and a person who is unable to pay the money to the driver, cannot even

move his engine. As he let the engine stay in the gymkhana, the municipality wanted him to pay the money for the place where he was keeping his engine, as rent. That even the land has become a commodity, for a person to utilise it for nothing but keeping a thing in its ground he has to pay a huge sum of money which he cannot even afford.

After deep thought I consented to pay the rent, and I paid ten rupees a month for the next three months. Dear sirs, I was a poor man. Even the house which I and my wife occupied cost me only four rupees a month.(Narayan, 2006)

He didn't have enough money to pay for the rent as well, he was a poor man but in that capital oriented society everything was being taken as a commodity, his survival was getting difficult day by day. He sold the jewels of his wife in order to pay the rent of the gymkhana ground, and then he takes the service of an elephant who is owned by the temple, and for that he also has to pay the money. Commodification has gone to that much extent that he had to pay the money for the elephant in order to move his, prize. There he also pays the money and for the damages he also needs to pay the money, for the injury of the elephant he needs to pay the money, for the place where the road engine gets to stay again he needs to pay the money. One finds that money has been centralised, and everything, whether it is an elephant, place of land, health services, everything has been commodified, and the person who is a poor man like the one in the story, he suffers a great deal because of that process of commodification. He sells, jewels of his wife, and he even thinks to go underground because he is that much indebted by the people because of the prize he won for himself that belongs to him, but because he is a poor man he cannot afford to buy that luxury.

Another important incident where we find the commodification is the encounter of the protagonist with the owner of the well, that he is ready to pay all the money to the protagonist, if he lets that road engine stay in that well, therefore, the owner of the well pays all the debts upon him, and he even pays for the damages caused by the road engine, one finds here that money is a powerful thing, and it can buy anything, thus in a capitalist society everything is a commodity and that commodity can be bought with the help of money.

4. Illusion of progress

The poor man believes that he is going to be advanced because he possesses a "modern" symbol of industrial society. Yet underlying class structure his poverty and powerlessness remains exactly the same or even get worse. The engine, a supposed symbol of development, actually exposes gap between the promise of progress and lived reality of exploitation. So *Engine Trouble* shows how capitalist societies create illusion of advancement for poors but in actual keep entangling them in continuous cycle of hardship and dependency. As in the story we see the protagonist from the very beginning to the end was caught up in an unending struggle to sell the engine but of no use. Instead he ends up losing what he already has.

The protagonist suffers a great deal because of poverty, as he doesn't have enough money to move the road engine out of that place. The protagonist says at the point, **"Dear sirs, I was a poor man"**(Narayan, 2006) Because of this poverty this protagonist had to suffer, he sells his wife's jewels because he had to pay the money to the municipality for the rent. The protagonist was living in poverty and because of that he couldn't even pay money for his own thing to move. The story tells how a person who is poor can't even enjoy his luck, for he is unable to get the joy of his own item, rather he has troubled himself after winning the prize that he has gone under debt because of that. Due to poverty it isn't only the protagonist who suffers but his wife as well because he sells his wife's jewels and sends her to her brother's home, and he thinks that he would go underground as well, thus one finds that because of poverty a person is suffering.

The society is making him poorer by its actions, as the municipality wants the rent for the ground where he is keeping the engine and for that ground he has to pay a sum of money, for the wall he broke he has to pay the money. These elements are making him poor and poor day by day. Whereas, on the other hand, is a person who has wealth and for him life is very much easy as the owner of the well pays all the debts of the protagonist and also pays for other expenses. If that much money was acquired by the protagonist, he could've enjoyed his prize and the luxury of owning a road engine and that could've become a fortune for him because he would have been able to sell that road engine and upgrade his life, rather, this poverty has made him poorer.

The writer hints at a point that for a person to enjoy his own prize, he must be rich as well because if a person is not wealthy in this capitalist world a person cannot even enjoy the luxury of winning their own item and in turn they have to suffer a great deal for even acquiring their own won item.

Conclusion:

Gramsci's work is still an effective guide for understanding how control is exercised over the mass of humanity, sometimes without anybody really knowing that it is being exercised against them. In contemporary literature we are seeing how people living in capitalist systems construct consent in subtle ways through their everyday use of language, habits and institutions, rather than only through violent coercion. For instance, illuminated narratives disclose how intricately commodification saturates people's lives and how everything from dreams, to workers' labour, to identity, can become objects for us to buy and sell. Likewise, these narratives delude us into believing in incremental but constant progress, which keeps us civilized and hopeful, while at the same time making sure we feel powerless. Every bureaucratic arrangement is presented to us as a relatively unbiased, an 'evenhanded' arrangement; the bureaucracy suppresses systemic inequality. However, even in the process of repression, we still see possibilities for both awareness and resistance in the narratives. There were often signs that folks push back and can 'almost be forgiven' for believing that they did in fact resist — they resisted the dominant order. When you deploy Gramsci's thoughts as outlined in this essay, you start to recognize that the first thing you have to do, when you start to understand how power gets done, is think about how to imagine and work towards a different and just future!

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