

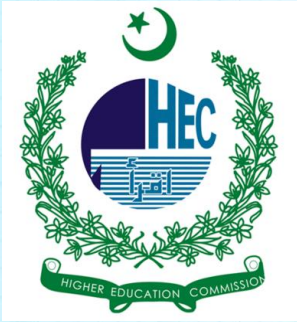
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**Class Disparities and Social Inequalities: A Marxist Study of the
Short Story Sehra-bai by Bapsi Sidhwa**



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Abstract

The short story *Sehra-bai* by Bapsi Sidhwa is examined through a Marxist lens to highlight the economic and disparities in gender prevalent in post-colonial Pakistan. Sidhwa illustrates the distinction between two types of personalities, highlighting how power inequalities foster social inequities. The research highlights the challenges posed by social hierarchy to personal objectives and identity, emphasizing the necessity for marginalized individuals to respond and adapt to these disparities. The objective of the study is to initiate discussions on social justice and equity by highlighting how literature addresses societal issues. This research enhances the comprehension of the influence of class, gender, and economy on individuals' lives, prompting a discussion and evaluation of persistent global disparities.

Keywords: Marxist theory, social justice, economic disparities, class struggles, socio-economic disparities

Introduction

The existence of classes with varying social roles today is rooted in historical and cultural precedents. The story, *Sehra-bai*, authored by Bapsi Sidhwa, underlines the gender disparity and economic difficulties faced by individuals following the British departure from Pakistan. Sidhwa crafts indelible characters and delineates their challenges to illustrate the disparities in lives between the powerful and the vulnerable. This analysis employs Raymond Williams' theory to examine the depiction of class relationships in Sidhwa's work (Williams, 1977). Employing a Marxist perspective, the analysis seeks to identify the power holders and examine how these power dynamics result in injustice, reflecting contemporary societal reality. This study analyzes financial models that influence individual decision-making and explores the effects of social hierarchy on society (Harvey, 2007).

The author depicts the realities of marginalized individuals and the impact of injustice on their particular circumstances. The narrative explores the principal characters and the impact of societal norms on their aspirations. This research emphasizes the significance of these themes for social justice and underscores that individuals persist in their struggle for equity despite these

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substantial disparities. Sidhwa's works distinctly illustrate the impact of class, gender, and economic elements on society and literary subjects. This study seeks to examine the significance of literature in depicting socio-economic realities that may illuminate prevailing inequalities in contemporary society.

This study examines how social hierarchy influences the overarching narrative through economic frameworks. Through the experiences of the protagonists, we underline the social impediments to a career and their tendency toward changing their identities. In some such narratives, like that of the male hero's journey, especially their ability to act within a predominantly male sphere is curtailed by gender norms and traditions. In Sidhwa's works, she interweaves class, gender, and economic themes to show how societal inequity plays out in different forms. However, when the character confronts any form of inequality, the narrative depicts the character's ongoing development. The findings reinforce that humans are not hardwired; they evolve and adapt to whatever settings they find themselves in. In addition, it expresses the significance of working together among people with similar ideals to lend collective support to the marginalized group.

The purpose of this study is to add to discourses on social justice and the constant search for equity in a world of magnanimous disparity. Sidhwa's novels, which depict social and economic challenges at the same time, show the effect of these challenges on people's lives. Lastly, after witnessing the narrator's adeptness at writing, the author encourages the listener to ponder the effect of socioeconomic disparity on inequality. It also shows that literature sheds light on the problems in today's society, arranges in-depth discussions, and enables society to think about important dilemmas. *Sehra-bai* is one such narrative that, from the perspective of Marxism, highlights the relevance of the tale of today, as well as our incessant struggle for elements that lead to equity and justice.

Statement of the Problem

Class disparity often leads to the endurance of inequality within groups, which consequently impacts the mobility and equality of several individuals. Investigating issues of inequality is particularly important in colonized nations, as certain individuals face disadvantages due to societal norms and disparities in power, gender, and class. As in *Sehra-bai* Sidhwa, it clearly demonstrates how a social structure that

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is tightly held can sometimes inflict unnecessary suffering and emotional distress. This significance lies in its demonstration of how limitations can alter identity, potentially enabling certain types of achievement. The Marxist theoretical approach assesses how Sidhwa's characters strive to overcome the challenge in a society in which class is well defined by resources and wealth. Through examining 'Sehra-bai' and the makeup of literature, this research seeks to aid in the conversations regarding social justice and wealth inequality.

Research Objective

- To analyze social barriers and their effects on individual identity and social mobility in the story *Sehra-bai* by Bapsi Sidhwa.

Research Question

1. How does Bapsi Sidhwa portray social barriers and their effects on individual identity and social mobility in the story *Sehra-bai*?

Significance of the Study

Social inequality and disparities in class still affect individual and societal life; thus, society must be conscious of them. Sidhwa's *Sehra-bai* confronts and remarks on underprivileged people's social boundaries, making this study important. This Marxist essay examines money, identity, and social mobility. Readers can grasp social injustice and characters' social circles through literature. Sidhwa examines her characters' issues and raises questions about social fairness. Literature depicts social reality and offers solutions, according to experts (Alfarhan, 2024).

This study also discusses social inequality by examining Sidhwa's post-colonial writings. In *Sehra-bai*, historical and cultural factors unequally shape personal lives. Thus, we should use literature to critique and change society (Natwarlal et al., 2023). This study is essential because it examines class, identity, and social mobility beyond a close reading of one text. This research uses Sidhwa's story to join the debate among researchers on literature's role in alleviating social inequality.

Delimitation of the Study

Several constraints guide the approach to conducting this study on Bapsi Sidhwa's short story *Sehra-bai*. Firstly, the research exclusively concentrates on this story to thoroughly examine its themes and main characters. Although Adding Insult to Injury adds value to social justice discussions, this study will only focus on *Sehra-bai*,

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leaving out Sidhwa's other works. Secondly, the Marxist framework has been utilized that emphasizes class conflict and economic logic to explain social inequality. This study does not address feminist, post-colonial, or psychological approaches because I am employing only this critical perspective. The research won't examine gender or ethnicity's effects because class differences matter most. The research focuses on the narrative's characters and relationships, not their impact on history or the real world. Although the context of post-colonial Pakistan is crucial, this study focuses on literary criticism rather than history.

Literature Review

Marxist perspectives examine the chosen works for analysis, highlighting class disparities, social inequities, and injustices inflicted against specific classes. They demonstrate that these themes manifest variably throughout cultures and eras, emphasizing the timeless importance of Marxism in literature.

In 2019, Yasemin AŞCI reviewed Charles Dickens' *Hard Times* (1854) and pointed out how Marxist concerns about labor and class conflict are present in the story. Through AŞCI, Dickens makes plain how people were exploited during the 1840s and spotlights how terrible conditions were for both the middle and working classes, as he continued to support improvements for society. In the same way, Lutz (2009) researches Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* (1997), in which economic uncertainty and male control lead the characters to find ways to gain power. Ningchuan (2012) analyzes *To Room Nineteen* (1978) by Doris Lessing using psychoanalysis and the theories of Marxist feminism, pointing out the tension created when gender identity clashes with the rules of society. Wade (1990) mentions Peter Abraham's novels *Song of the City* (1945) and *Mine Boy* (1946), pointing out how they highlight the injustice of capitalism and racial divisions in South Africa. At the end, Afolayan (2011) looks at Nigerian literature, focusing on *Ill Winds* (2004) by Lekan Oyegoke and *The Sympathetic Undertaker and Other Dreams* (1993) by Biyi Bandele-Thomas, both describing dystopian societies with corrupt leaders. All these studies together make it clear that Marxist ideas have a lasting presence in literature.

In *Jane Eyre* (1847), Charlotte Brontë describes how the class system of England played a big role in society and financial matters. By presenting Jane, Brontë highlights how corrupt the upper class can be and how alone and ruled by tyranny

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people in the lower classes can become. Jane's connection with Rochester portrays the difficulties of social classes while she figures out her place in society. The author raises the issue of whether love might bridge gaps formed by class differences, as Jane represents someone trying to lift the upper class out of its pride and other faults. The novel is written with many gothic touches, underlined by suspense, to examine issues of gender, class gaps, and deceit (Dean, 2016).

In the same way, Dean studies Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* (1813) from a Marxist perspective and highlights the contrast between what people want and what they accomplish. Austen often portrays how people try to handle wealth, power, and gender standards in a place where class divides are strong. The disagreements between Elizabeth and Darcy mostly result from their different social characters. Austen shows her criticism of the bourgeoisie through characters like Mrs. Bennet, who mainly wishes to get her daughters married to wealthy men. Because of this emphasis, it is clear that the way people act and how society views them is strongly affected by their position in pre-industrial English society. Employing Marxist criticism, we can better see the way class and gender interact in Austen's books.

Mr. Darcy's aunt demonstrates upper-class snobbery by snubbing Elizabeth, reflecting the prevalent prejudices among the wealthy in the novel's era. Although the novel appeared before Marx's ideas, it highlights how class issues and being part of society are important for achieving success. Certain critics maintain that Austen exposes ongoing tensions about wealth and class by using the romance genre (Akhtar, 2015). Also, Samuel Beckett's play *Waiting for Godot* (written in 1952) examines problems of existential despair and oppression from people in power by showing the pointless waiting of Pozzo and Lucky.

A Marxist viewpoint is used by Toni Morrison in *Beloved* (1987) to explore racism and patriarchy in the Black community. According to Morrison, to truly be free means confronting slavery's aftermath, which is shown by characters such as Baby Suggs, who are strong. Based on what Tyson (1998) and Eagleton (1983) say, Marxism is important in literature by showing that every aspect of society, such as art, contributes to the economy and discusses matters of class and social justice.

In *The Story of Noble Rot* by Uzma Aslam Khan, Chaudry is a carpenter, and Malika works hard to make sure their son Momin does not become a low-skilled worker.

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Malika seeks to provide an education for their children, but Masood only wants to save for their daughter's dowry, which results in disagreements and leads to Malika doing something wrong. Her story reveals the ways most humans experience hardships because of limited resources. Dobie (2011) uses Marxist theory to investigate how these characters respond to their social and economic problems.

In her analysis of *Pride and Prejudice*, Fatima Siddiqui points out that the novel depicts the upper class judging the working class, illustrated by the Bingleys' surprise at finding the agreeable Mr. Gardiner, despite his occupation in trade (Siddiqui). There is a social hierarchy in these books, and the way characters move through it often follows the traditions made by ruling elites. Siddiqui highlights that women experience significant impact as they strive for freedom, yet sexual aspects and marriage outcomes remain unchanged.

Both in *The Murder of Aziz Khan* and *Moth Smoke*, Zulfikar Ghose and Mohsin Hamid feature people from various financial classes, showing the distress caused by their poverty (Perveen & Ghafoor, 2017). The story shows how being rich or poor, as in the case of Aurangzeb and Daru, affects a person's identity and outlook. Marxist literary criticism is based on the ideas of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels and looks at how economic matters affect social organization and an individual's mind. This approach emphasizes that the economic foundation of society, which includes the literary output, shapes its structure (Jay, 1993). Analyzing the context of literature and its values is necessary, as main societal views usually shape its stories and the author's view of the world (Eagleton, 1976).

Central to the study of texts by Marxist critics are conflicts, revolving mostly around class and social issues within the literature. Adopting this perspective, one can link economic activities with literature, which helped to form theories like new historicism and cultural materialism. Marxist critique looks into a literary work's beliefs about culture, race, class, and power to expose hidden beliefs and support justice for those who are left out. Some people say that literature criticizes economic oppression by placing more importance on content and ideas compared to artistic qualities.

Marx and Engels assert that "the history of all societies is fundamentally a narrative of class struggle" (p. 219). This approach is clear in Shakespeare's *The Merchant of*

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Venice, which looks at how capitalism affects those who are not wealthy. Awan and Raza mention in their work (2016) that Orwell's *Animal Farm* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four* reveal the intersection between Marxism and dystopia. The aim of this study is to understand Tariq Rahman's *The Sweepress*, which deals with class conflicts and economic inequalities. According to Eagleton (2002), literature shows the socio-economic conditions of its time, so it's vital for understanding class issues. By showing the protagonist as marginalized, Rahman helps us see the results of economic inequality in Pakistan.

South Asian society and economy play a big role in shaping Tariq Rahman's ideas. Ahmad (2000) points out that classical South Asian literature reflects on topics such as colonialism, class, and caste. Manto, Chughtai, and Rahman depict the struggles of individuals oppressed by their community's ancient traditions. Even though most focus on his work in language and education (Rahman, 1996), Khan (2015) suggests that the books can also be explored using Marxism for their discussion of social issues and identity. Such a focus points out that class conflicts are a result of unequal economics. Rahman employs *The Sweepress* to examine Sukhan's experiences of social division and challenges stemming from poverty and prejudice. Arundhati Roy uses *The God of Small Things* to look at caste inequalities, portraying the forbidden relationship between Veluntha, who is untouchable, and Ammu, who is from a high-class family. *The White Tiger* looks at India's capitalist economy through the journey of Balram, who is a driver in a rich family. Works written by Muhammad and Hamid, such as *Our Lady Alice Bhatti* and *Moth Smoke*, deal with the subject of class and wealth disparities in Pakistan. All of these works contribute to demonstrating that Marxist theory is valuable for examining social and economic conflicts, as both locals and outsiders discuss the class structures present in society.

Research Methodology

A qualitative approach is used in this study to assess class divisions and social inequality in Bapsi Sidhwa's short story "Sehra-bai." As a literary analysis study, this is an asset to scholars who can dissect the themes, characters and plot intricately, thus giving clear insights into the socio cultural circumstances which positively or negatively affect the experiences and the identities of the characters. Using qualitative research methods, this study seeks to explain how Sidhwa encounters the societal

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limits as well as define what the effects of these constraints are in terms of individual identity and social mobility. The qualitative analysis of the short story concluded by the researcher and they have a complete understanding of the short story to analyze the psychological and emotional aspect of life of the characters. This method makes Sidhwa's work important to the current literary criticism because it is a complex illustration of the issue of socioeconomic inequality in the backdrop of the discourse of post-colonialism.

To investigate the issues stated in the research question, the research is based on analyzing primary and secondary sources and an in-depth analysis is undertaken. The purpose of this study lies in integrating a bunch of different academic viewpoints so that the complicated relation between class and identity shared in 'Sehra-bai' could be discussed thoroughly. In this chapter I explain the methods of collecting data, analyzing data and explain the theoretical framework on this investigation. Using a sophisticated qualitative research methodology to this end, this study applies thematic analysis and Marxist theory to Sidhwa's narrative to locate the hierarchies of power underlying her text. The methodology of the study was prefaced not only on the objectives of the study but also it increased understanding of the socio economic factors that affect conditions of agency and social mobility in a post-colonial situation. The novel *Sehra-bai* written by Bapsi Sidhwa represents a significant source of information for this investigation. In order to conduct a comprehensive analysis of a text, it is important to pay attention to the text's words, visuals (if there are any), the relationships between characters, and the many ways in which the narrative is told. The text is read multiple times with the purpose of locating passages that bring attention to the problems of social inequality and class distinction. Through the rigorous examination of literature, one can gain an understanding of the emotions and experiences that the characters go through, as well as the ways in which the world around them has influenced their lives. The books written by Sidhwa provide an opportunity to observe how the socioeconomic status of an individual might influence their aspirations and behaviors patterns (Culler, 2017).

Additional secondary research and publications are required to enhance the depth of this analysis. Selected publications, including essays, books, and criticisms that examine Sidhwa's novels and social disparities, are going to be the topic of

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analysis. The journals must concentrate on research aims, be authored by renowned experts, and contribute to the enhancement of social and political discourse. Post-colonialism, social justice, and feminist theory are ideas that engage numerous critics of Sidhwa's oeuvre. Monitoring secondary sources enhances the comprehensiveness of the analysis (Yousaf 2024).

Theoretical Framework

The study relies on a Marxist approach to study the differences between classes and social inequity in Bapsi Sidhwa's short story "Sehra-bai." Marxist theory highlights the ways in which economic and social structures shape the relationships people have and their personal identities, giving class struggle a main role in understanding society. The approach lets the research find out how the state of the economy affects the characters, what they want, and how they relate to each other in the novel.

Marxism asserts that economic shifts shape society's structure, while class dynamics determine power dynamics. In the story of *Sehra-bai*, Sidhwa reveals that Sehra's social mobility is hindered by her economic background and reveals the problems she encounters because of it. The novel tells us that inequality based on class shapes people's lives and often causes poverty to continue for generations. The researchers examine how the characters in poverty cope with their environment and how society marginalizes them.

Also, the Marxist framework helps critique the capitalist system shown in the novel. It encourages an examination of why most wealth and power are concentrated in the hands of a minority, while the majority struggle to meet their basic needs. It shows that issues of social inequality are systemic and economic differences are rooted in the traditions and beliefs of society. Examining issues like social struggles, building identity, and opportunities for advancement in life allows the study to bring out the criticisms of society in Sidhwa's narrative, which helps readers understand her work better.

In brief, the Marxist theory creates a firm platform for exploring how class, identity, and social justice influence "Sehra-bai." Thanks to this, the analysis of Sidhwa's work gets more sophisticated, and Marxism proves to be a lasting force in today's literary criticism. Employing Marxist theory, we examine how the characters in *Sehra-bai* address the challenges that Sidhwa indicates as fundamental to their

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existence. The study may examine the influence of economic conditions on individuals' personalities, their interpersonal reactions, and their aspirations for life. When these ideas are employed, studies reveal how the author's convictions regarding unfairness and injustice are manifest within the text yet simultaneously shielded from the reader.

Analysis

In *Sehra-bai*, it is evident that the challenges and aspirations Sehra encounters predominantly stem from the inequitable treatment resulting from class disparities. Marxism posits that the story illustrates how individuals' surroundings and financial status influence their character and hinder social mobility. The novel elucidates the factors that confer greater advantages to the affluent compared to the impoverished. It meticulously examines sections of the text that address disparities in wealth, the development of identity, and alterations in social standing.

Sidhwa's narrative effectively illustrates the psychological and emotional aspects of a fragmented society. Sehra-bai, the protagonist, illustrates everyday challenges encountered by individuals experiencing poverty or resource constraints. Her narratives show how class disparity consistently delays the fundamental aspirations of certain individuals. According to Louis Althusser (2016), school, family, and media systems affect individuals' lives through ideology. The societal constraints depicted in the narrative illustrate how the protagonist's identity is shaped by her social class. It facilitates understanding of how she illustrates the social and economic circumstances that affect her protagonists.

Also, the story illustrates that the disadvantaged situation of traditional societies is often passed down through generations. While moving through her neighborhood, Sehra-bai sees clearly the factors that make it tough for her and others to rise in social status. Such a pattern is characteristic of the Marxist idea of class reproduction, which happens when inequality in the system continually holds back the working class (Bourdieu, 1986). Sidhwa portrays how the community where Sehra-bai belongs struggles under the weight of economic exploitation and worries about survival. The story clearly shows how economic and social circumstances can control a person's life and explains that escaping poverty is often much too hard to imagine. The sections of text chosen discuss these themes and give a better idea of what *Sehra-*

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bai experienced and the economic situation she encountered.

Excerpt

1. Sehra-bai stood at the edge of the marketplace, watching the wealthy pass by in their finery.
2. Her own clothes were tattered, remnants of a life once filled with hope.
3. The laughter of children echoed around her, but she felt isolated in her struggles.

This section makes it abundantly clear that Sehra-bai's poverty isolates her from the wealthy. Having her spatially separated from others symbolizes how marginalized she is, and the backdrop of wealthy businessmen and their “finery” paired with Emily's torn clothes illustrates the difference in social class identities. *Rivers of Words* highlights how much this racial and class divide affects her feelings and demonstrates the problem of social inequality for her. Pierre Bourdieu pointed out that social class plays a big role in how individuals perceive and experience things, forming their identity and what they hope to achieve (Bourdieu, 1984).

Excerpt

1. As she observed the merchants haggle, she felt the weight of her own unfulfilled dreams.
2. The vibrant colors of the market seemed to mock her faded reality.
3. She often wondered if she would ever escape the cycle of poverty.

Sidhwa vividly shows here that Sehra-bai is conflicted because of her situation in life. Merchants trying to sell more goods at higher prices represents how capitalism drives social class, leaving a lot of money with a few people and none for most. The bright colors stand for her hopes for a better life, which is the opposite of how her life actually is. Because of this conflict, readers can experience the mental strain caused by social inequality experienced by Sehra-bai. According to David Harvey, who works in Marxist theory, capitalist systems tend to portray opportunities that do not exist and at the same time support growing inequality (Harvey, 2007).

Excerpt

1. Each day, she watched as the same struggles repeated themselves in her community.
2. Families were torn apart by the demands of survival, chasing wages that barely fed them.

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3. Hope was a luxury they could no longer afford.

These lines illustrate that poor families tend to keep being poor, which harms their community. She depicts the difficult circumstances where having what you need can destroy family ties. By saying “hope was a luxury,” the novel clearly shows how little hope these characters had, following the Marxist idea that the rules favor profit over the well-being of the masses. The inability of the system to improve leads to even more inequalities and keeps the same people in a cycle of challenge. Sociologist Arlie Russell Hochschild points out that dealing with emotional burdens often makes the working class feel powerless and give up (Mayer & Hochschild, 2017).

Excerpt

1. Sehra-bai's heart ached for change, yet every effort seemed futile.
2. She saw the powerful consolidate their wealth while the poor grew poorer.
3. In her mind, the world was a stage, and she played the role of the invisible.

Sidhwa draws Sehra-bai's desire to do something different while being fully aware of the social obstacles. Her perspective highlights the challenges faced by those at the bottom, illustrating how the affluent profit from the struggles of the impoverished. By picturing the world as a stage, the text shows how society ignores the struggles of the poor. This imagery illustrates how social inequality results in laws that marginalize Sehra-bai and others in similar situations, rendering them unable to speak out. Marxist theorist Herbert Marcuse (2025) noted that the major ideology often stops people from standing up, letting them think they do not matter.

The analysis reveals that the story, *Sehra-bai*, sharply highlights the issues brought about by class differences and inequality. The story outlines the main character's adversities and at the same time criticizes the underlying economic systems that lead to these problems. With this approach, this study points out the need to overcome the obstacles preventing people from advancing and making decisions in today's world.

Contribution to Literary Criticism

Through the lens of Marxism, the research endeavors to broaden one's understanding of themes of social justice and class in literary works. Her books provide an explanation for various child-related concerns, and Marxist analysis enables us to comprehend the essential significance of these experiences. During the course of the

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investigation, it becomes abundantly evident that Marxist theory is still of immense significance, and it also highlights the fact that literature must address concerns of social inequality (Smith, 2020).

It was primarily for the purpose of conducting an in-depth investigation into the impacts of social inequalities and distinctions in social class that the technique was developed. The purpose of the study is to assist us in locating the significant economic and social aspects that are concealed beneath the overarching narrative. According to Foley (2019), the research continues the discussion of social justice in literature by concentrating on the challenges that people face in class, the ways in which they discover their identity, and the shifts that occur in social situations.

To provide a more comprehensive explanation of Sidhwa's writing, the analysis makes use of information derived from both the text itself and from scholarly works. The purpose of this organization is to provide an explanation of the significance of literature in the process of confronting injustices and advocating for change.

Conclusion

It has examined how Marxist concepts facilitate the interpretation of class and inequality issues in South Asian narratives. We have pointed out that Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, and Rahman's *The Sweepers* show the ways in which their societies controlled the lives of the poorer and middle classes. The goal was to see how literature displays the difficulties of the economic gap and the lasting effects of class on personal lives and relationships. The research questions focused on discovering how these stories highlight the hardships of minority groups and the wider effects of economic and social factors in their daily lives. It is clear from this study that including Marxist ideas in literary analysis helps you see how the world around a novel affects its characters and plot. We have shown in fiction like *The Sweepers* how literature helps to question common beliefs and urges equality for all. It looks into the problem of economic inequality and also explains why Marxist theory continues to be applied in current literary criticism. All in all, looking into these themes helps us realize how literature, society, and economic systems are connected, justifying further discussions about class and who is represented in literature.

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