



**RESEARCH PAPER**

**Marxist Analysis of Economic Conditions in “The Jungle Book”:  
Unveiling Socioeconomic Battles in the Animated World**

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**ABSTRACT**

The aim of the study is to explore the underlying repressive Marxist ideologies such as socioeconomic conditions, class system, class struggle, consumerism and commodification in the movie. Drawing on superstructure model, the study also aims to explore the ways in which historical and material circumstances and their relationship manifest in the movie, how it perpetuates capitalist tendencies in society, providing a deeper understanding of the underlying power dynamics and exploitation present in society from a Marxist perspective. The researcher adopted the exploratory re-search framework. The study utilized a qualitative research approach by applying Marxist theory for content analysis on an animated movie “The Jungle Book” as a sample. The sample was determined through typical and critical case sampling methods from animated movies of the world that has basic elements of Marxism. The findings of the study reveal that there are implicit Marxist tendencies present in the movie that conform to the superstructure model of the world. The major characters of the movie strive for economic prosperity and have convenient interactions with one another, which lead to capitalistic attitude, imperialistic dominance, class struggle resulting in consumer culture and commodified relationships. The summative discussions within the light of the findings acquired in this study imply that Marxist elements have been deeply portrayed in the movie and serve as a platform to unveil socioeconomic battles within an animated world through a Marxist lens, exposing the underlying power dynamics, exploitation, and capitalist tendencies present in society.

**KEYWORDS** Class Struggle, Commodification, Consumerism, Marxism, The Jungle Book

**Introduction**

Among many, one of the major roles of pieces of literature has always been to be a source of entertainment and pleasure for its readers. This has also led to the creation of huge amount of fictional literature including kid’s literature, as it is not beyond from impact of society and animated movies as a part of Kid’s literature have a unique impact on the thoughts and attitudes of children and control the actions of children by strongly influencing their minds of kid’s because media influences the thoughts, attitudes, and actions of the audience and develop ideology (Gatel, 2019). At some stage, the authors have seized this opportunity and have provided not only the entertainment to the kids but also the moral direction. But many have concocted apparently harmless stories expressive of innocent desires of love and affection without any didactic aim. This effort, though seemingly unhazardous, has largely contributed to the normalization of social hierarchies and class system which are at the very root of inequality and discrimination prevalent in the society. The Jungle Book (2016) is a film adaptation of one such novel of the same name penned down by Rudyard Kipling in 1894.

Over the years, a number of literary works in children's genre have been looked upon keenly and several ideological undertones have been found in them establishing the fact that no piece of writing is devoid of additional hidden meaning. Likewise, Kipling's *The Jungle Book* (1894) and its 2016 film adaptation by Jon Favreau have come under the microscope several times and its plot, characters and themes have been analyzed at length.

Like many others, these captivating fictional creations have a lot more to them than they let on. As a movie, "*The Jungle Book* appears innocent" (Majid, 2022, p.81). Indeed, nothing "could be more harmless than animals in their natural habitat, raising and interacting with a boy who is - at times - one of their own. Yet, the development and performance of *The Jungle Book* as a film "production raises a whole host of issues, namely in terms of the nexus of the liminality of youth and the racialized hybrid of animal-man-Other, and more widely in terms of generational, racial, imperial" and socioeconomic problematic.

Therefore, this paper aims to study the 2016 film adaptation of this novel from Marxist perspective of class system and socioeconomic hierarchy with the objective of revealing how ostensibly spotless kid's literature covertly perpetuates and inculcates undesirable ideologies like economic power entails social power, classism, consumerism and commodification which also give rise to false consciousness among the masses.

Literature is never beyond the real world as it is just reflection of real world. Literature always portrays real life through imaginative character, which is not real but reflects the reality (Gull et al., 2023). Socioeconomic condition and class system present with the existence of society as human start to live in a society so it is common to reflect this class system and socioeconomic relation through animated movies in literature generally and in Kid's literature especially. There have been many studies conducted on animated movie "*The Jungle Book*" none have yet examined it from Marxist perspectives to explore the concepts of class struggle and socioeconomic perspectives. Therefore, it is necessary to study the underlying socioeconomic dynamics, power struggles, class-consciousness, consumerism and commodification beneath the anthropomorphic interaction of animals in the animated movie "*The Jungle Book*".

## Literature Review

### Description of the Theory

Karl Marx, a philosopher, economist, and historian, developed Marxism, a theory that criticizes capitalist systems as exploitative and predicts that they will eventually lead to class conflict between the capitalist and working classes in social, political, and economic aspects. Marx argued that culture is not a separate entity but rather a product of the historical conditions in which people create their material lives. The power dynamics of exploitation and domination that govern the social and economic order in a particular period of human history will ultimately shape the entire cultural existence of society and social hierarchy (Pranoto & Suprayogi, 2020; Suprayogi & Novanti, 2021).

Marxism theory is a social, economic, and political framework that seeks to explain how societies develop over time. At the heart of this theory, economic relationships are the foundations of all social relationships and social hierarchy. Marx argued that throughout history, societies have been divided into two classes: the ruling class (which owns the means of production) and the working class (which sells its labor to the ruling class). Marx believed that this class struggle was the driving force behind historical change.

Marx also developed a model of society that is called “superstructure”. According to this model, the superstructure is made up of all the institutions and practices that are not directly related to economic production such as religion, politics and culture. Superstructure is shaped by the economic base of society. In other words, the economic relationships between classes determine the nature of the superstructure. For example, Marx believed that the ruling class to maintain their power over the working class used religion and politics. Marx’s theory has been influential in many fields, including sociology, economics, and political science. The superstructure model continues to be used to analyze the relationship between economic and social structures in modern societies.

Puspita (2021) conducted a study to explore the Marxism elements in an animated movie “The Bee” and found that Marxism is a popular method for analyzing contemporary social hierarchy and class struggle in any literary work." This approach emphasizes how economic and social systems shape human behavior and is reflected in cultural products. Researchers can explore how the film depicts labor exploitation and wealth inequality in capitalism, challenges capitalist values, and promotes socialist ideals. Analyzing the characters' portrayal of different social classes informs the film's Marxist critique of capitalism. In their work titled "Marxist's Ideology and Revolution analysis of George Orwell's Novel 'Animal Farm'," Siahaan (2018) examined the novel from a Marxist perspective to explore its ideology and revolution. The research concluded that Animal Farm represents a country similar to Russia during the time of the Bolshevik revolution in 1917. This study aims to discuss themes of exploitation, class struggle, and class warfare depicted in the novel by applying Marxist theory.

### **Description of animated movie “The Jungle Book”**

“The Jungle Book” is a classic animated movie produced by Walt Disney productions in 1967. The story revolves around the adventures of a younger boy “Mowgli” who was raised by pack of wolves in the jungle. The movie is based on the novel of Rudyard Kipling “The Jungle Book”. The film begins with Bagheera, a black panther, discovering Mowgli as a baby and bringing him to a pack of wolves to be raised as one of their own. As Mowgli grows up, he becomes friends with Baloo, a fun-loving bear who teaches him about the "Bare Necessities" of life in the jungle. However, Mowgli’s peaceful life is threatened when “Sher Khan”, a fierce tiger with a vendetta against humans, returns to the jungle and try to kill him. Bagheera decides that it is best for Mowgli to leave the jungle and return to the man-village for his own safety. Along the way, Mowgli meets various animal characters, including Kaa, a sly python who tries to hypnotize him and King Louie, and an orangutan who wants Mowgli to teach him how to make fire.

Eventually, Mowgli and Bagheera are separated, and a group of monkeys who take him to King Louie’s palace captures Mowgli. King Louie wants Mowgli to reveal the secret of fire, but Mowgli escapes with the help of Baloo. Mowgli and Baloo's friendship deepens as they spend time together in the jungle, but their fun is vanished when Sher Khan tracks them down. In the final showdown, Mowgli uses his intelligence and bravery to defeat Sher Khan and save himself from harm. The movie features memorable musical numbers such as "The Bare Necessities" and "I Wanna Be like You," which are still popular today. The animation is colorful and vibrant, bringing the jungle setting and its inhabitants to life. Overall, "The Jungle Book" is a heartwarming tale about friendship, bravery, and finding one's place in the world. The characters are lovable, and the story is timeless, making it a classic that has been enjoyed by generations of viewers.

Stkip (2022) conducted a study to analyze the main character Mowgli in an animated movie "The Jungle Book" by using structuralism theory and its techniques. The result of the study revealed that Mowgli is a careless, complaining, and curious and an ambitious person. Amelia & Saragih (2022) conducted a research on the original novel of the animated movie "The Jungle Book" by applying Erikson's theory of identity crisis and Freud's Interpretation of Dreams for psychoanalytic study. The result discovered that the main character undergoes an identity crisis and utilizes coping mechanisms to navigate through this challenging period.

In McNulty's (2022) analysis of Jon Favreau's *The Jungle Book*, researcher approached the film from a unique perspective by using Morton's Ecological Thought. Through this approach, McNulty aimed to demonstrate the possibility of creating a society of inclusion that rejects anthropocentrism and aligns with contemporary environmentalist concerns. The study focuses on how the film portrays the relationship between humans and animals and how it challenges traditional anthropocentric perspectives. By examining the film through an ecological lens, McNulty highlighted the importance of recognizing the interdependence and interconnectedness of all living beings in creating a sustainable and inclusive society.

## Material and Methods

### Research Design

A qualitative research design used to investigate the Marxist elements, such as imperialism, class struggle, rugged individualism, consumerism and commodification in the animated movie "The Jungle Book". To collect data, a mixed purposeful sampling strategy has been adopted, where the primary source of data is the movie's content itself and review of researchers and experts about movie is secondary data. Researchers utilized the narrative analysis technique, which is a sub-type of content analysis, to explore the movie's themes and elements of Marxism by analyzing dialogue and characters.

### Framework of Analysis

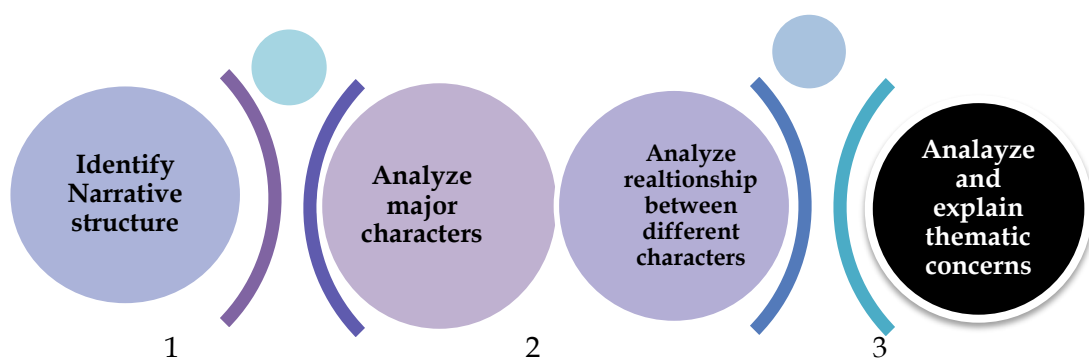


Figure 1: Framework of analysis

An animated movie always consists of two types of characters based on story and sub-story in the movie major characters and minor characters. Researchers analyzed Marxist elements by keenly analyzing the diction, dialogue, social roles, and behavioral traits of major characters of the movie one by one. The theoretical framework of research consists of four steps.

1. Identify the narrative structure of the movie comprising characters, theme, and diction. This was supportive in the analysis of the Marxist elements in the movie.
2. Analyze the portrayal of major characters and elements of Marxism. It was helpful in finding imperialistic undertones and class system in the society.
3. Analyze the relationship between different characters to explore the consumerism and commodification.
4. Analyze and explore the themes such as social dominance by means of economic power. This will provide insight into whether the movie portrayed socioeconomic battles in the animated world.

## **Results and Discussion**

### **Capitalism**

The law of the jungle is very similar to the capitalist system of a human society. It is a system of open season in which individuals earn their livelihood without any regard for their fellows. It is a system of exploitation where only the strong survive. In the beginning of the movie, during one of the practice runs, Bagheera said to Mowgli, "if you can't learn to run with the pack one of these days, you'll be someone's dinner". It shows that the inhabitants of the jungle take what they can. Similarly, during the water truce when one of the cubs asks Akela, the leader of the pack, whether he would make a fine wolf, Akela responds humorously by saying that "the runt gets eaten in some pack". Though this comment is made in lighter note, it highlights the gravity of the situation and speaks volumes of the law of the jungle as oppressive and exploitative. On the contrary, a glimpse of the equality that Marxism aspires to achieve is seen when all the animals gather to drink water at the appearance of Peace Rock and no animal hunts other during the water truce.

### **Imperialism**

Sher Khan represents imperial power in "The Jungle Book". He comes to drink water during water truce and makes threats to Akela, warning of grave consequences if he doesn't handover Mowgli to him. Akela politely reminds him of the water truce and the fact that wolves rule that part of the jungle. However, it seems Sher Khan has no regard for their jurisdiction and wants to take Mowgli at any cost. He disguises his intention as being for the collective good and welfare of the jungle, claiming that grown-up men are dangerous for the jungle and its inhabitants. In reality, he is only concerned with saving his own skin and doesn't care about the jungle or others animals. He feels threatened by Mowgli existence because he not only strengthens the wolves and makes it difficult Sher Khan imperial aspirations to prosper, but also because Sher Khan has experienced defeat at the hands of a grown-up man in the past. Hence, he portrays Mowgli as a threat to everyone for the sake of his own safety and growth. Later, Sher Khan forcefully takes over the wolves' territory to find Mowgli and, upon not finding him there, he kills Akela. He stays there and harasses the pack.

### **Class System**

Not all animals are equal in the jungle. There is a tacit hierarchy based on the animals' ability to look after themselves and survive. There are those who are given the ultimate rank of creators and shapers of the jungle, such as elephants. They are revered and feared alike by all in the jungle. When Mowgli sees them for the first time while

accompanying Bagheera to the man's village, Bagheera asks him to bow his head in respect for the herd of elephants, as they are the ones who created the jungle with their tusks and trunks. Similarly, King Louie of the Bandar-log, with his humongous size and dominating aura, serves as the classic example of class oppression in *The Jungle Book*. He rules the Bandar-log with a strict hand. Despite the fact that his subjects are the ones who work and bring him food, he controls the supply chain and gives them little by little to get by and that too on his whim.

### **Rugged Individualism**

As every person is for himself or herself in the jungle, there comes a time when Mowgli realizes this reality and parts ways from the pack. When the monsoon season returns after an arid period, the wolf pack starts to worry that Sher Khan will come to take Mowgli away with him or worse, kill him. They want him to leave the pack for the safety of the rest of the wolves. Understanding the gravity of the situation, Mowgli takes the initiative and decides to leave the pack for good. He gears up to make his own way and find a new living place and companions for himself. Bagheera accompanies him on his quest and suggests that he should go back to his own kind. Mowgli, on the other hand, seems hell-bent on finding his own identity within the realm of the jungle. In the meanwhile, Sher Khan attacks Mowgli and he hides among a herd of buffaloes nearby and escapes with them. In doing so, he exhibits a wonderful resourcefulness and self-reliance. He not only fends for himself but also survives in harsh and challenging conditions. Later in the movie, when he learns about Akela's death, he portrays enormous grit and rugged individualism with his decision to put an end to Sher Khan's tyranny all by himself. Firstly, his decision to confront Sher Khan with red flower (fire) and later, to fight him barehanded after being tricked by him into giving up the red flame, shows his tenacity but also a sheer disregard for the well-being of others. In order to ascertain his dominance and take over the power from Sher Khan, Mowgli brings red flame to the jungle to fight him. His action bears severe consequences for the jungle as the whole forest catches fire due to his recklessness. He and the others barely make it out alive.

### **Consumerism**

Some animals in the jungle are resourceful and influential, while others adopt the ideology of "shop till you drop" to make up for their lack of dominance. Baloo is one of the latter. He finds Mowgli while he is running away from Sher Khan. Mowgli falls into the alluring trap of Kaa, a giant snake, and just as he is about to become Kaa's prey, Baloo saves him. Discerning his agility, Baloo decides to put Mowgli's abilities to use for his advantage. He exacts payback from Mowgli by asking him to harvest honey from high positions. He cons Mowgli into helping him collect and store honey for his so-called winter hibernation. It is later revealed by Bagheera that bears do not hibernate in the jungle. It turns out that Baloo is driven by consumerism as he collects and stores honey with the help of Mowgli until there is no more room left for the honey to be stored. Having honey, which is his prime source of nourishment, gives him a sense of security and prosperity that makes him feel powerful. As the powerful in the jungle can get food whenever they want, he feels that if he amasses enough honey so that he can get it whenever he needs it, he will be as powerful as some others are in the jungle.

### **Commodification**

Mowgli becomes a commodity, which either someone wants to have for its use value or wants to keep for its exchange value, in the jungle. Mowgli, owing to his immense resourcefulness and ability to do things that are common animal cannot do,

ensures economic growth and power for whomever he is residing with. Mowgli is not of any use to wolves, but they do not want to lose him initially for what he represents. That is why they try to mask his real self by teaching him the ways of the wolf and forcing him to adopt the “wolves’ way” and give up the men’s way by calling it tricks. They understand his exchange value and what his presence entails and stands for in the jungle. It gives them an upper hand over other animals as many of them are of afraid of his peculiar form. Sher Khan, too, is aware of this reality. He knows that Mowgli will be the biggest threat to his imperial intentions, if he is not now, then when he grows up. He wants to eliminate him for his exchange value and for what having him could mean for others.

On the contrary, Baloo and King Louie want to have him for his use value. Baloo, being a big old bear, is afraid of heights and needs someone to harvest honey from high positions. Mowgli, with his flexibility and agility, is the perfect person for the job. Therefore, he tricks Mowgli into living with him and uses him to get honey from the places that are not easily accessible to him. Later in the movie, Mowgli is kidnapped and taken to King Louie. King Louie wants Mowgli to give him “red flower” because it symbolizes economic growth and power. As it is made and used by men, he assumes that Mowgli, being a man cub, can give it to him. He wants to control it to have ultimate power over the jungle. He cannot not make it and control it himself; he wants to keep Mowgli with him and use him for his own expansion schemes.

There is a wide range of kids and anthropomorphic literature and movies produced around the globe. It is widely considered harmless and a source of entertainment for kids. Due to its wide acceptance among the masses, it has never been frowned upon and has always eluded the eyes of researchers. Though there are underlying repressive ideologies in play in almost all of the material produced for kids, it has never been studied in length. A few studies have been conducted on some of the renowned animated movies such as *The Lion King*, *Tarzan* and *Tom and Jerry* etc. but many of them have been studied from the perspectives other than Marxism.

The author’s observation regarding the presence of hidden ideas in kids’ literature and animated movies as have been identified in the findings of this study has been consolidated in a study conducted by White (2015). In his study, *Tarzan in the Soviet Union: British Lord, American Movie Idol and Soviet Counterculture Figure*, he found that a whole generation of youth in post-World War II soviet society idealized Tarzan and saw him as a symbol of individualism. Even though Tarzan was not part of propaganda in the post war years and was vetted and cleared by Soviets as a safe entertainment reading material for youth, it inadvertently impelled a counterculture revolution within the Soviet Union, which idealized America as a land of personal freedom and individualism. This unintentional counterculture revolution affirms the notion that the kids’ entertainment material including the animated movie *The Jungle Books* stands for far more than mere enjoyment.

Similarly, Wijma (2017) studied white male privilege in *Tarzan of the Apes* and Disney’s *Tarzan* and analyzed both via closed reading method. Her focus was on the presence of undertones of racism and sexism in Tarzan’s character. Her observations concluded that the character of Tarzan did exhibit bias in the favor of white male thus reinforcing the idea of white male privilege. Despite different nature and aspect of the study, her conclusion reiterates the observations made by the author of this paper that cartoonish representation of a character does not make it any less harmful and it is equally capable of propounding a belief as any other piece of written and graphic literature.

Another example of such anthropomorphic movie is *The Lion King* (2019). On the surface, this popular film depicts a struggle between vice and virtue, truth and lie, right and wrong; however, Herdarsyah (2021) has drawn a comparison between the coup d'état in *The Lion King* and Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. He used Antonio Gramsci's concept of hegemony of power to study the causes of coup d'état namely obsession, discrimination and betrayal. He found the similarities between the causes of coup d'état in both the works. Hence, the apparently innocent animated production, *The Lion King*, conveys covert message of standing up to the oppression, cruelty and betrayal, which again affirms that writer understands such productions are not merely for entertainment and serve much higher purpose.

As far Marxist study of the animated movies and kids' literature is concerned, there was a huge gap in the available literature. Material for children's entertainment had been studied from various point of view but the researches was unable to find a significant number of Marxist studies in it. Hence, the author attempted to bridge the gap not only by highlighting the fact that the kids' fiction propagates repressive ideologies but also by identifying Marxist elements in the movie *The Jungle Book*. By applying super-structure model, the writer identified various elements of Marxism in the animated movie including capitalism, imperialism, class system, rugged individualism, consumerism and commodification. Various researchers have conducted similar studies on a number of works of fiction and have identified the presence of similar components of Marxism in other works.

Base and superstructure model has been the cornerstone of a number of Marxist studies. Many researchers, including the writer, has applied it on several pieces of fiction to establish that the economic prosperity is at the heart of all the socio-political developments. Those holding sway over the wealth have the autonomy to make decisions, not only about themselves but also about the fate of others. In other words, they control people, rather oppress them. Their privileged position give rise to classes and the conflict between them. Therefore, it is safe to say that economic power and security is widely sought after and is the theme of many literary works. In this study, the author has elaborated that Mowgli of *The Jungle Book* movie stands for that broadly desired economic surety and freedom and, therefore, has been the person of interest for all the parties involved. Similarly, using superstructure model, Bashir et al. (2019) have also observed in their analysis of Katherine Mansfield's *The Garden Party* that economics play a big role in the formation of social classes which in turn affect the behavior of the people. They have found that the upper class subjugates the lower class in their Marxist analysis of the short story.

Furthermore, economic stability is one of the key factors that plays a decisive role in the dynamics of human relationships. At the very heart of the foundations of human relationships are consumer culture and commodification. One is prone to form relationships with the people who are in the position of providing the support at the time of need. In recent times, relationships have grown to have more strategic importance than an emotional one. Irum et al. (2018) highlighted this aspect of commodification of human relationships and its impact on Pakistani society in their Marxist analysis of Uzma Aslam Khan's novels *Trespassing* and *The Geometry of God*. From the perspective of consumerism and Frankfurt's school critique of culture industry, their work analyzed the role of culture industry in promoting consumer products, which gave rise to materialism and artificial pomp. This had detrimental effect on human relationships and contributed to its commodification. The researcher of this study-in-hand have attempted to elucidate the similar commodification of relationships in the movie *The Jungle Book*.



In another study, Royanian et al. (2016) examined class oppression and commodification in Shakespeare's Hamlet and Merchant of Venice from Marxist standpoint. It is noteworthy that the research findings reinforce the writer's stance regarding socio-economic interaction and its role in the formation of commodified relationships. It was found that superior class oppress and exploit the inferior class leading to the commodification of the latter.

### **Conclusion**

The Marxist analysis of the economic conditions depicted in "The Jungle Book" reveals the presence of various deeply embedded elements of Marxism, including capitalism, imperialism, the class system, rugged individualism, consumerism and commodification. The animated movie "The Jungle Book" explores elements of Marxism by portraying Mowgli as a commodity, highlighting the concept of use value and sign-exchange value. The characters in the animated movie recognize Mowgli's economic significance and seek to either utilize him for his resourcefulness or eliminate him as a threat to their own power and control. The historical and material circumstances in the movie "The Jungle Book" are reflected through the super-structure model of Karl Marx. The economic base of society represented by the class struggle and exploitation shapes the superstructure of the jungle. The ruling class, such as Sher Khan seeks to maintain their dominance and imperial intentions, while the working class, like the wolves, tries to mask Mowgli's true identity to preserve their own position.

Consumerism and commodification are evident in Jon Favreau's movie adaptation of "The Jungle Book". Baloo and King Louie both exploit Mowgli for his use value. Baloo uses Mowgli's abilities to harvest honey, while King Louie desires Mowgli's ability to control the power symbolized by the red flower. It highlights how individuals and entities in the society seek to possess and control resources for their own gain, perpetuating a consumerist mindset. Overall, animated movie "The Jungle Book" serves as a platform to unveil socioeconomic battles within an animated world through a Marxist lens, exposing the underlying power dynamics, exploitation, and capitalist tendencies present in society.

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