



**RESEARCH PAPER**

**Exploring Class Struggle and Economic Inequality in Tariq Rahman's  
*The Sweepress*: A Marxist Analysis**

<sup>1</sup>Zainab Bakhtawar, <sup>2</sup>Areeba Memon\* and <sup>3</sup>Dr. Saima Yousaf Khan

1. BS Candidate, Department of English Language and Literature, Shaikh Ayaz University Shikarpur, Sindh, Pakistan
2. BS Candidates, Department of English Language and Literature, Shaikh Ayaz University Shikarpur, Sindh, Pakistan
3. Lecturer, Department of English Literature, University of Balochistan, Quetta, Balochistan, Pakistan

\*Corresponding Author: areebamemon959@gmail.com

**ABSTRACT**

The objective of this study is to analyze the portrayal of class struggle and socioeconomic inequality in the short story *The Sweepress* by Tariq Rahman, employing a Marxist analytical framework. By highlighting these structural inequalities, this study demonstrates the significance of Marxism in understanding the socio-economic disparities within society. The study utilizes a qualitative methodology, relying on textual analysis to interpret the story's themes and characters through key Marxist concepts such as the class system, exploitation, alienation, and structural inequality. The findings reveal that *The Sweepress* vividly depicts the exploitation of the working class, specifically the caste-marked laborers, and their struggle against systemic inequality. The story highlights the perpetuation of power dynamics by the bourgeoisie and the resultant alienation and dehumanization faced by the proletariat. The narrative not only critiques the entrenched class and caste hierarchies but also underscores the resilience and agency of the oppressed.

**KEYWORDS** Class Discrimination, Economic Exploitation, Marxist Analysis, Short Story, Tariq Rahman, *The Sweepress*

**Introduction**

The literature functions as a mirror of society, reflecting discrimination in social structures, dynamics of power, struggle, and inequality. Writers often use their work to highlight social issues and societal challenges. In this regard, renowned Pakistani author Tariq Rahman has become famous for his nuanced portrayals of the interaction between marginalized communities and the oppressive system. In this short story, *The Sweepress*, Tariq Rahman portrays the Situation of the working class community in Pakistan.

This story revolves around the character of Sukhan and her family. They belong to the unprivileged sweeper community, who faces social injustice, class struggle, racism and financial problems. Sukhan's husband is not abusive, but he is lazy and irresponsible, offering minimal support to the household as he engages in gambling and drinking. Despite these challenges, Sukhan dreams of a better future for her two children. She works tirelessly, enduring daily humiliation. Her son, Muddu, resents her perceived lack of self-esteem, while her daughter, Shadan, faces similar discrimination at school. Sukhan's son, a brilliant student, secures a scholarship to medical college but requires additional funds to continue his education. In desperation, Sukhan claims to have been hurt by Wudud's car to get money for her son's education. She successfully tricks him into giving her five hundred rupees.

Muddu, on the other hand, is embarrassed by her action and feels guilty about it. Sukhan feels hopeful to her aim of becoming her son as a doctor. The story closes with Sukhan gaining the necessary finances, but her decisions cause her son to anger towards her. Furthermore, Sukhan's daily life is marked by hard work, humiliation, and hopes for his children's improved future. The narrative also illustrates how financial imbalance restricts the advancement opportunities for the lower socioeconomic groups.

This research explores the theme of class struggle and economic disparity through a Marxist lens using Tariq Rahman's work *The Sweepress* by analyzing the representation of class struggle and economic inequality in the context of socio-economic structures and the exploitation of oppressed communities, providing insight into the complexities of class struggles and the agency of the marginalized.

### Literature Review

The analysis of class struggle and economic inequality has long been a central concern of Marxist criticism, which focuses on the ways in which socio-economic systems exert a material influence upon the production of narrative and the representation of character. This review will situate Tariq Rahman's *The Sweepress* within this established critical tradition, evaluating its treatment of class struggle and economic inequality.

Marxist literary criticism provides an analytical framework for understanding how literature both reflects and challenges social and economic realities (Eagleton 2002). Eagleton explains that literature is a cultural product that responds to specific circumstances and ideological assumptions. Williams (1977) argues that literary texts articulate debates over conflicting interests in times of capitalist crisis or transformation, often exposing contradictions inherent in class structures or clarifying the mechanisms through which oppression is achieved. These foundational insights will form the basis for studying *The Sweepress*'s exposure of symptomatic truths about economic inequality.

The portrayal of marginalized groups through literature plays a vital role in our comprehension of class operations. For Spivak (1988), it can be used as an apparatus of the subaltern or to seal the lips of them.

In *The Sweepress*, Rahman's focus on a marginalized protagonist offers an opportunity to analyze how economic inequality shapes individual and collective experiences. Works by Pakistani authors, such as Sidhwa's *Ice-Candy Man* and Hanif's *A Case of Exploding Mangoes*, have explored socio-economic and political disparities, but Rahman's portrayal of the sweepress as a subaltern figure requires a unique Marxist lens.

The socio-economic contexts of South Asian is a backdrop for understanding the writings of Rahman. According to Ahmad (2000), South Asian literature and especially that of India deals with the legacy of colonialism, and class and caste inheritances. This perpetuation is seen in Manto's, Chughtai's, and Rahman's works which deal with the sufferings of the marginalized poor classes under various forms of oppressions existing in traditional cultures and societies. These cultural contexts form an important background for *The Sweepress* as well.

Most discussions on Rahman are related to his work in linguistics or in education (Rahman, 1996). His creative works have received little critical attention. However, Khan (2015) argues that it is incorrect because Rahman has addressed issues pertaining to social identities through his narratives which foreground socio-political imbalances

found fertile ground for Marxist analysis. Such research gap should be filled by this discussion since embedded within this narrative tale also includes that class tensions exist when man exploits man where economics ends up inflicting pain on certain sections rather than benefiting them.

Marxist theory was emerged in the mid nineteenth century by the philosopher and sociologist Karl Marx. Further it was promoted by Friedrich Engels. This theory focuses on class system and economic disparity in society. Literature serves as a framework for class conflict, highlighting conflicts between different social groups. He highlights the significance of ideology in forming characters and narratives, which is relevant to Rahman's portrayal of the Sweepress and her socioeconomic struggles. (Eagleton, 1976).

From a Marxist standpoint, people are separated into social and economic classes, which Tyson (2006) asserts are more significant than differences based on gender, ethnicity, religion, or nationality. In essence, it implies that class is the basis for individual distinctions, which frequently result from variations in financial and economic standing.

Throughout the history many writers have worked on this perspective. They have critiqued power dynamics and economic inequality of their society in their literary works. Native English writers such as Charles Dickens in his novels *Hard Times*, *Oliver Twist* and *Great Expectations*, George Orwell in his novel *A Tale of Two Cities*, John Steinbeck in his novels *Of Mice and Men* and *The Grapes of Wrath* and many other writers critique class system and socioeconomical differences in their works. Similarly non-native writers have also adopted Marxist perspectives in their writing. Tariq Rahman, a well-known Pakistani writer is one of them who explored social hierarchy and struggle of lower class in his short story *The Sweepress*. The Protagonist Sukhan a sweepress belongs to a marginalized community in Pakistan. She faces social discrimination and economic struggle.

Roy (1997) explores social class and caste based discrimination in Indian society through her novel *The God of Small Things*. She highlights the suffering of the character Veluntha a lower class man (often known as untouchable) who loves the Ammu a high class Christian woman. Their love is forbidden due to the caste discrimination and class difference. Roy's this novel clearly adapts Marxist perspective.

Adiga (2008) explores the socio-economic problems in his novel *The White Tiger*. The protagonist Balram who works as a driver for a rich Indian family. Initially, he suffers discrimination by upper class people. Then he chooses illegal way to escape exploitation and mobilize his social status. Through this novel Arvind Adiga critiques the capitalist system in India and also highlights the exploitation of lower class people in capitalist society.

Muhammad (2011) addresses the class based as well as religious discrimination in Pakistani society through his novel *Our Lady Alice Bhatti*. The protagonist Alice belongs to a minority Christian religion as well as lower class. She and her family faces discrimination and exploitation. Through this novel Muhammad Hanif supports Marxist perspective by highlighting class struggles in Pakistani society.

Ashiq et al (2024) examine social and economic conflict in Mohsin Hamid's Novel *Moth Smoke* through Marxist perspective. The protagonist Daru a young man who suffers economic hardship due to Pakistan's economic decline. This study highlights that how

characters' economic conditions influence their actions resulting their happiness and despair.

Hussan et al (2021), focuses on the analysis of Tariq Rehman's story *The Moustache* through the application of Marxism. In this story Rahman highlights the suffering of lower class in the feudal system of Pakistan. This study also gives suggestions to eradicate class discrimination in society taking into the Marxism.

Awan and Raza (2016) analyzed *Animal Farm* (1945) and *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949) from a Marxist viewpoint to investigate the role of ideologies in the construction of a dystopian future. They have connected Marxism with dystopia, arguing that they are derived from and give birth to one another.

Bashir et al (2020) evaluate Katherine Mansfield's story *The Garden Party* from a Marxist perspective. In this story, Mansfield underlines the gap between the wealthy and the poor. The Sheridan family is wealthy, whereas their neighbors, the Scotts, are poor. When a middle class men, Mr. Scott, dies, the Sheridan ignores it as unimportant and continues their party. This story depicts class system, social inequality and struggles of the poor community.

### Material and Methods

This research has been conducted by using qualitative method which involves non-numeric data. It analyzes the themes of social discrimination, class system and economic disparity as depicted in short story *The Sweepers* through the Marxist perspective. The study derives its data derived from the text of the story thorough textual analysis and close reading. According to Stanley Fish, close reading is an approach that focuses on the interpretive process in which the reader drawn meaning from the text itself. (Fish, 1980). Similarly, in this research paper, the information about the social discrimination and economic imbalance is collected through an interpretive process.

This study uses Marxism as its main theoretical framework to analyze Tariq Rahman's story " *The Sweepers*." Marxism is a way of understanding society that focuses on the conflicts between different social classes, particularly the working class. According to Marxist proposition, history is shaped by the struggles between these classes, which leads to social change.

The theory was formulated by Karl Marx and Fredrich Engels in their work, "*The Communist Manifesto*". Karl Marx argue that capitalist society is divided into the two classes the bourgeoisie the upper class who owns the means of production such as factories, land and other resources. On the other hand proletariat the working class people who do not own any property or resources but sell their labour as a resource of their survival. The wages provided to the working class is not enough to support their household. Hence, the high class (bourgeoisie) holds the power while lower class is exploited and oppressed.

In their work, *The Communist Manifesto*, Karl Marx and Fredrich Engels argue that in order to keep the working class from uniting and betraying the Capitalist system, the ruling class makes the strategies like racism, religion and nationalism. These strategies foster division in society.

According to Marx, History demonstrates the existence of class struggle centuries earlier. Marxism focuses on the relationships and conflicts between social classes,

particularly the struggle between the working class (proletariat) and the ruling class (bourgeoisie).

## Results and Discussion

### Class-based Discrimination

Karl Marx and Fredrich Engels in their work “*The Communist Manifesto*” assert that a capitalist society is made up of two classes the upper class (bourgeoisie) and lower class (proletariat). History of all societies, they argue, reflects the struggle between these two classes. In this struggle, lower class is often exploited and discriminated.

Similarly, Tariq Rahman, in his short story *The Sweepress* highlights the exploitation and discrimination faced by the working class in Pakistani society. The story reflects the marginalisation of lower class. In *The Sweepress*, Tariq Rahman writes, “Sukhan did not remember a time when the sun had not burnt her black skin or the winter winds stab her like stilettos”. He portrays the harsh life of the main character, Sukhan, who belongs to the lower working class, whether it is scorching heat or biting cold, she endures both.

Even in her mother’s time, these hardships were granted as part of their life. Their hunger was also considered normal. They try to avoid staring at the fresh, delicious food being cooked at Chaudhry’s house, because it intensifies their strong hunger. Moreover, the aroma of food made their mouth water.

Moreover, The mistress (Bibi Jee) who represents high class, treats them like outcasts or untouchable who must be kept at distance. She shows contempt for them while giving leftover food. “They stood as far away from the scowling Bibi Ji as possible while one of the servants kept shouting: “pare hut, pare hut, choore! (get away, get away, sweeper!).” (Rahman, 1991). The food given to them is rotten and cold, but enough to remove their hunger.

In the evening, they return to their menial unpleasant job of cleaning loads of excrement. Despite their harsh labour, the people see them with contempt and degradation and ignore their existence. It shows the act of dehumanization by high class and discrimination and marginalisation faced by lower working class especially sweepers and janitors.

### Caste-based prejudice and racial discrimination

In a Capitalist society, caste based discrimination is not only a social issue but it also deeply interconnected with the class oppression. (Gail, 1994). Caste based discrimination goes hand in hand with class based discrimination to foster inequality in society. Lower casts are often assigned menial and derogatory labours which are typically low paid.

Moreover, racism is also one of the strategies made by ruling class that prevent the proletariat from uniting and betraying capitalists. (Marx & Engels 1848). It is essential for maintaining the Capitalist system and fostering the social and economic divisions in society. Racial inequality plays a significant role in the exploitation of the lower class. Cedric asserts that capitalism does not cause racial discrimination but rather racism existed before capitalism (Robinson, 1983).

Likewise, Tariq Rahman portrays the caste based inequality and racial discrimination faced by the lower class community (cleaners or janitors) in Pakistan. *"They were the outcastes, the untouchables, of this Muslim society though they were Christians or Muslims now having converted from Hinduism in order to lose their untouchability"* (Rahman, 1991). Even after converting their religion, they are regarded as untouchables because of their historical caste and ancestry.

When they entered Pakistan, they started doing menial jobs such as cleaning roads, offices, and sweeping latrines. Sukhan and her husband do the same job of cleaning in the morning as well as in the evening. At night, she also joined gutter cleaners. Despite their labourous and unpleasant job, they are given insufficient wages because of their lower caste and social background. People call them "Chooras" a derogatory word used for sweepers. Sukhan's children also get the same treatment in their school. Her son Muddu whose real name is Ahmed is brutally beaten by his teacher and also made to massage his teacher's legs. Likewise, Shadan, Sukhan's daughter, is insulted by calling black sweepress, represents discrimination based on race. This treatment reflects how the people of lower caste are regarded as outcasts because of their social and economic background.

### **Social Class**

Class is a group of people who share similar economic positions, such as the same education, social status, occupation, and have similar opportunities for material wealth and life. (Weber, 1922).

Tariq Rahman in his story, *"The Sweepress"*, depicts the characters that belong to different classes. Chaudhury and other Characters like Dr. Wudud is said to represent the upper class. They enjoy wealth, power and social status. While Sukhan, protagonist of the story and her family belong to the working class. They are engaged in menial labour (latrine cleaning) and work hard. They face hardships and discrimination. Their struggles represent the daily hardships of the working class people.

### **Economic Exploitation**

In *The Communist Manifesto*, Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels explain how the wealthy (bourgeoisie) take advantage of the poor (proletariat). It refers to a way in which workers are treated unfairly. Marx argues that workers are exploited; they do the hard work, but they do not get paid for the full value of what they produce. (Marx, 1867).

In the same way Tariq Rahman highlights how economic exploitation affects people in the story like Sukhan and her family, who belong to a lower working class. Sukhan works as a Sweeper, performing hard menial work and low paying labour that society often devalues. Sukhan's family faces problems like poverty and often goes hungry, it shows how the lower working class community faces struggles and survives in problematic situations. This idea is related to Marx's theory that labourers are confined within a system that prevents moving from one social class to another social class.

Sukhan's husband was indolent and would gamble in the evenings, rather than contributing to the household. It emphasizes the economic struggles and lack of stability within the working class.

Furthermore, Sukhan's family faces the rude and ill-mannered language and behaviour from people who have authority. This shows the connection between economic status and social identity. The phrase "pare hut, pare hut, (get away, get away,

sweeper) demonstrates the disrespectful treatment they endure from upper class community.

### **Economic Hardship**

Economic hardship is the key concept in Marxism. In capitalist society, workers are exploited by the capitalist class (bourgeoisie) and face the economic hardship (Marx, 1859). Wealth is held by the upper class while the lower working class remains either hand to mouth or poor. They endure economic hardship in fulfilling their basic needs because of being low paid.

Similarly, Tariq Rahman, in his story *The Sweepress*, portrays the economic hardship faced by the characters. Sukhan's son Muddu has to get admission in medical college. He gets the scholarship that is spent on buying books and good clothes. The admission in college for both Muddu and Shadan cost a thousand rupees which Sukhan's family cannot afford because of being poor. As she wants Muddu to become a doctor, she starts begging and also ask for loan. She adds her own saving but still she cannot gather the required amount. She also considers to sell her silver jewellery, which she has kept for her daughter Shadan's dawry, even though she knows that girls are rarely married without dowry. Feeling hopeless, she plans a cunning trick for gathering remaining money. She pretends to be hit by Dr. Wudud's car. He gives her five hundred rupee note for her medical aid. Her son enrages by her sharp mind, but still she focus on making her son doctor.

The prevalent system of inequality causes Sukhan to experience such financial hardships. Moreover the economic imbalance restricts Sukhan's family to access opportunities and education even it also forces her to gather money by deceiving. The efforts and financial challenges faced by Sukhan and her family, highlight the harsh realities of economic hardship faced by lower working class.

### **Alienation**

Alienation is characterized as alienated labour. The concept of alienated labour in Karl Marx's Manuscripts refers to forced and involuntary work where the worker experiences a lack of purpose, pleasure, or satisfaction, fails to meet their needs, lacks autonomy or control, and does not achieve mental or physical development. (Marx. K, 1844).

Similarly in Tariq Rahman's story "*The Sweepress*", a story about the life of a sweeper. The theme of alienation can be seen through the character of Sukhan, who performs menial works. Sukhan is treated from her community as an outcast, reflecting social stigma attached to their occupation. The derogatory term chooras, signifies their low standing.

Sukhan feels alienated (disconnected) from her work and society. Her job as a sweeper feels disrespectful, and she is treated as less than human by others. Marxist theory stated that workers feel alienated because they are treated as tools rather than people. Sukhan's labour does not bring her joy or recognition. Despite her hard work, society views her as dirty because of her job.

Furthermore, Tariq Rahman portrays the alienation in several ways that are in line with Marx's theory. The Sweepers' work is to clean the spaces of others but she has no ownership over those places. The places she cleans are not hers, and the result of her

labour do not benefit her, they benefit the society that hires her. The Sweepers' Job is repetitive and monotonous. She performs her duties under the command of others, with no control over it. Society views sweepers as inferior and she faces social isolation due to her low status.

### **Conclusion**

From the above discussion, therefore, it can be concluded that Tariq Rahman, one of the best known academic scholar and Pakistani writer, vividly describe the prevalent class system in Pakistan through his writings. The Marxist analysis of the story *The Sweepers (1991)* provides a comprehensive study of the socio-economic condition of lower working class in a capitalist society. The study delves into the marginalisation and exploitation faced by this class due to the systematic class discrimination. Moreover, the lower class characters also face discrimination based on their caste and race, being regarded as untouchables or inferior. The story clearly highlights the dehumanization and contempt shown by upper class and the derogation faced by lower working class particularly sweepers. Besides, it also examines how the workers are exploited in spite of their harsh menial labour and the financial hardship they endure because of being low paid. The study not only highlights the class discrimination and exploitation faced by lower working class but also serves as a critique of the prevalent inequality based on class and caste in capitalist society.



## References

- Ahmad, A. (2000). *In theory: Classes, nations, literatures*. Verso.
- Adiga, A. (2008). *The white tiger*. HarperCollins.
- Ashiq, et al. (2024). Dominance and hegemony: A study of Marxist class conflict in Mohsin Hamid's *Moth Smoke*. *International Journal of Contemporary Issues in Social Sciences*, 8(2), 51-63.
- Awan, A. G., & Raza, S. A. (2016). Effects of totalitarianism & Marxism towards dystopian society in George Orwell's selected fictions. *Global Journal of Management and Social Sciences*, 2(4), 21-37.
- Bashir, T., Mir, H. S., & Mehmood, A. (2020). Marxism and literature: Marxist analysis of "The Garden Party". *Liberal Arts and Social Sciences International Journal (LASSIJ)*, 12(3), 201-217.
- Culler, J. (1997). *Literary theory: A very short introduction*. Oxford University Press.
- Eagleton, T. (2002). *Marxism and literary criticism*. Routledge.
- Fish, S. (1980). *Is there a text in this class? The authority of interpretive communities*. Harvard University Press.
- Hanif, M. (2011). *Our Lady Alice Bhatti*. Random House Publisher India Pvt. Limited.
- Hassan, S., Rahman, G., & Aryan, A. A. (2021). The application of Marxism in the short story "The Moustache" by Tariq Rahman. *Global Political Review*, 6(2), 251-260.
- Jameson, F. (1981). *The political unconscious: Narrative as a socially symbolic act*. Cornell University Press.
- Khan, M. S. (2015). Socio-political dynamics in Pakistani English fiction. *Journal of South Asian Studies*, 30(2), 45-62.
- Lukács, G. (1971). *The theory of the novel*. MIT Press.
- Marx, K. (1844). *Economic and philosophical manuscript* (Published 1959). Progress Publishers.
- Marx, K. (1859). *A contribution to the critique of political economy*. Progress Publishers.
- Marx, K. (1867). *Das Kapital*. Otto Meissner.
- Marx, K., & Engels, F. (2002). *The Communist Manifesto* (G. Stedman Jones, Ed.). Penguin Classics. (Original work published 1848).
- Omvedt, G. (1994). *Dalits and the democratic revolution: Dr. Ambedkar and the Dalit movement in colonial India*. Sage Publications.
- Rahman, T. (1996). *Language and politics in Pakistan*. Oxford University Press.
- Robinson, C. (1983). *Black Marxism: The making of Black radical tradition*. Zed Books.

Roy, A. (1997). *The god of small things* (1st ed.). India Ink.

Spivak, G. C. (1988). Can the subaltern speak? In C. Nelson & L. Grossberg (Eds.), *Marxism and the interpretation of culture* (pp. 271-313). University of Illinois Press.

Tyson, L. (2006). *Critical theory today: A user-friendly guide* (2nd ed.). Routledge.

Weber, M. (1920s). *Economy and society: An outline of interpretive sociology*. University of California Press.

Williams, R. (1977). *Marxism and literature*. Oxford University Press.