



RESEARCH PAPER

Critique of Class Distinction and Resistance: A Study of Guy de Maupassant's *The Necklace*

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ABSTRACT

The study aims to investigate class distinction in Maupassant's *The Necklace* from the perspective of Marxism. Marx and Engels highlight that in capitalism, due to minimum state's interference in the economic affairs, wealth concentrates in the few hands, resulting the sharp division of society into two classes: the rich and the poor. The former exploits the resources of the latter. All means of production and subsistence are in the hands of the few and majority just depends on them. This extreme disparity results in class conflicts. *The Necklace* also reveals the unequal distribution of wealth, and disparity between the two classes. It reflects class distinctions and resists the ideology of dominant class. The research uses qualitative research and textual analysis to highlight the aspects of class differences and resistance in the story. The topic under study has been broached for the first time, thus recommending a new vista for further research.

KEYWORDS Marxism, Class Distinction, Class Differences, Privatization, Disparity, Resistance and Conflicts

Introduction

The idea of "class distinctions" is the very base of Marxism. Actually, "Marxian theory is a class theory" (Wolf et al., 1987, p. 125). Marx argues that in capitalism due to the minimum interference of state in the economic affairs of individuals, private property and cut-throat competition, wealth concentrates in the few hands of rich. The result is that society is divided sharply into two distinct classes: the rich and the poor. There is a wide economic gap and inequality. The rich class uses different strategies and techniques to exploit the poor. Marx and Engels (1948) in their famous work *Manifesto of the Communist Party* state:

In capitalist states majority of people are "exploited by the handful of persons and whom the exploiters would like to keep in further subjugation, win the rights and attain to the that power to which they are entitled as the producers of all wealth. (p. 57)

The proletariats or workers who form the majority of any state are badly suppressed. In capitalism all means of productions and subsistence are in the hand of the rich class (Marx, & Engels, 1948, p. 43). Due to the superior economic status of the rich class, the important organs of state and superstructure are under the strong grip of the rich class. They are used just tools by the rich against the poor for multiplying its wealth. Marx and Angels criticize the capitalist states where "the state power assume[s] more and more the character of the national power of capital over labour, of a public force organized for social enslavement, of an engine of class despotism" (p. 58). As all state's organs support the rich, consequently the bourgeois or the rich class multiplies its wealth

through the labour of proletariat. Due to the labour of proletariats (workers), the bourgeoisies maximize their capital, but the workers are in turn deprived even of their proper share. They are given meagre wages and salaries. Thus, "the proletariat is that class in society which lives entirely from the sale of its labour and does not draw profit from any kind of capital" (p. 42).

According to Marx and Engels (1848), the unequal distribution of wealth on the one hand is a source of class distinctions and differences; on the other hand, it is the greatest source of class antagonisms. Since the formation of classed society, these two classes are in conflicts with each other, sometime hidden and sometime open till the ruin of one class and the formation of different classes with different moods of exploitation and antagonism. Marx and Engels declare, "the history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggle" (p. 42).

In *Communist Manifesto*, Marx and Engels use dichotomous words for the two distinct classes and people belong to them; such as, oppressor and oppressed, exploiter and exploited, dominant and subordinate classes, free man and slave, and lord and serf. In this connection, Anthony Giddens (1971) argues: "The yield of the model of class relations which is basically dichotomous....all class societies are built around a primary line of division between two antagonistic classes, one dominant and the other subordinate" (p. 37).

To end the class distinctions and conflicts, Marxism propounds the ideas of "elimination of private property and communism". To Marxists the very base of class distinctions and differences is private property. To construct the classless society, private property should be nationalized (Marx & Engels, 1948, p. 40).

Throughout their life Marx and Engels were striving hard for the rights of proletariat (working class) class as to them it was "the most suffering class" (p. 32). By proletariats or workers, they do not mean a specific population but the majority of people attached to the diverse professions and controlled by the rich or bourgeois class:

Workers (proletariats) are those "who must sell themselves piecemeal" for a wage of salary as the *Communist Manifesto* says. This applies equally today the car worker, the office clerk, the teacher the junior doctor....those who work for wage, are almost all working class. (Marxist Net, 2016)

Bowens et al. (1974) see working class in some broader perspective and argue that proletariat class is not limited to the industrial workers, but all those people, who are living in the capitalist state and serve under the influence of dominant class, are workers. They state, "The working class includes all the people who create all the goods and services in capitalist society....The unemployed are also workers and unemployment is a constant and necessary feature of capitalism" (p. 2).

This research aims to find Marxist critique of class distinction and resistance of the proletariat, the exploited class towards the dominant class that exploits the former in the short story.

Literature Review

Maupassant's short story, *The Necklace*, is a well-known story that has been investigated in various contexts. A short summary of the few researches is given below:

Izhar, Arbab and Hameed (2023) investigate the themes of fate and choice in *The Necklace* from the perspective of existentialism. This study looks into the existence-based notion of authenticity and self-identity and examines how Madame Loisel's premature beliefs in materialism and social standing impinge on her decisions in her later life. The study analyzes how her (Madame Loisel's) story shows the variance between accepting fate and making decisions by explaining the existential techniques and comprehending human nature and existence.

Handayani and Rahmawati (2023) make a descriptive study by analyzing the feeling of inferiority and striving for superiority by Mathilde Loisel, the protagonist of *The Necklace*, through the prism of Alfred Adler's Individual Psychology. The analysis shows that the protagonist struggles hard from her inferiority (her shortcomings) to attain superiority (success) by means of various forms of complex compensation and superiority.

Rahman, Shah and Khatoon (2022) examine *The Necklace* under the principles of structuralism, in which they mainly focused on analyzing the "words and phrases" of text and find binary oppositions in the protagonist, Matilda's life; like, poverty and wealth, Id and Superego (the former stands for irrational desire while the latter for sensibility) and synchronic and diachronic relationships that structured the components of narrative structure of the story.

Syed and Asad (2024) examine the relationship between prestige and social life by investigating the protagonist, Mathilde's experience in *The Necklace*. They interpret the symbol of necklace and explain how the lifestyle of the character, though depicted long ago by Maupassant in the story, is related and parallel to people of the present. Their analysis shows that the protagonist's life is extensively impacted by prestige and reputation in *The Necklace*. She tries the hardest to achieve her goal that is beyond her capabilities leading her to the tragic end. At the end, she realizes that whatever she is doing is impossible and unreal, and her downfall is due to the loss of genuine self-esteem that is modesty and integrity not the false show that makes people prestigious both of modern era through social media credit and old era of becoming sudden famous in parties like Mathilde's success on "the day of the ball".

Nnyagu and Victor C (2018) read *The Necklace* under the themes of illusion and fiction that easily fade and ultimately kill the aspirants. Many families and marriages shatter simply because the spouses aspire to live beyond their standard and resources, and sometime women like Mathilde in the short story force their husbands to borrow and purchase expensive stuffs simply to be noticed by the society. Some people go to the extreme and show the trait of aristocratic class that is beyond their grasp. Thus, fictitious and illusionary attitude destroy the life of people both in fiction and real life. The research aims at reading the short story, *The Necklace*, to look at the role of illusionary and fictitious attitudes, particularly of women, and to help couples to live meaningful life in society by avoiding such mind-set.

Shah and Aziz (2017) have attempted to investigate the narrative structure of *The Necklace* under Bremond's narrative model, *The Logic of Narrative Possibilities*. Their study looks into a range of functions of micro, macro, elementary and complex sequences and explores that the protagonist, Mathilde, fails to reach objective (become prosperous and famous) owing to her inability to take relevant action that is termed under the model as process of non-actualization.

The review of the literature shows that the theme of class distinction and resistance, under Marxist paradigm, has not been dealt with; this research is to fill the gap by broaching and interpreting the topic.

Material and Methods

The research makes use of qualitative research method and textual analysis to unearth the particular meanings in the short story. There are different kinds of textual analysis; the research, as suggested, is using Marxist critique as a framework that analyzes a text from a particular perspective. A Marxist critique deals with wide range of ideas that involves analyzing and interpreting an artwork or a text focusing on issues, like:

- 1) Class relations: Investigating how class struggle and economic structures form the subject matter and theme in the text.
- 2) Dominant ideology: Examining ideology and power structures that maintain disparity and social inequality.
- 3) Material conditions: Critiquing how the material and economic conditions influence the subject matter and characters in the text.

Thus Marxist critique itself deals with wide spectrum of ideas; however, the present research, as suggested, is limited to the particular aspect of class relations that is analyzing class distinction and resistance in the text. Thus, a particular concept has been touched out of wide range of issues of Marxist theoretical framework.

Similarly, today Marxism is not only limited to the idea of Marx and Engels but has broadened and evolved into different forms; like Marxist Feminism, Postcolonial Marxism, Post Modern Marxism etc. Wolf et al. (1987) highlight that with passage of time Marxism has developed into different branches and schools of thought, and now there is no single definitive Marxist theory (p. 130). However, the present research is limited to the earlier Marxism and focuses on those aspects of Marxism which are mentioned by Marx and Engels, especially in their enduring work, *The Communist Manifesto*.

Results and Discussion

The short story, *The Necklace*, by Maupassant also tells us about the class distinctions and wide economic gap between the rich and poor classes. On the superficial level, it is just a story revolves around the lost necklace, which is replica, but read between the lines, the readers come to know that it is a powerful expression of class distinction. The writer shows that poor people lead very hard life and not in position to both end meet. They are deprived of the very basic necessity of life.

In the short story, Mathilde and her husband, a clerk at the Ministry of Public Instruction, represent the poor and working class and Mme. Forestier, the Minister of Public instruction, jewelers, money lenders and Mathilde's school-mate at the convent, represent the rich class. The writer contrasts the status of the former with latter and shows that there is an extreme disparity and economic gap between the two classes. The house of clerk is shabby and unkempt. His wife, Mathilde, has no dowry, no dress and no rank because she is the wife of clerk. She has no expectation because she knows that being the wife of clerk (the most underpaid profession), she will remain poor forever. She longs for those things which are considered just of trivial importance by the rich:

She suffered from the poverty of her dwelling, from the wretched look of the walls from the worn-out chairs, from the ugliness of curtains. All those things of which another woman would never have been conscious tortured her and mad her angry. (Maupassant, n.d, p. 1)

Everything in her house is worn out and shabby. On the one hand, "She (Mathilde) has no dresses, no jewel and nothing" (p. 1). On the other hand, Mme. Forestier possesses every thing. Her house is well facilitated and furnished. She has varieties of jewels. She has a large box which is full of precious jewels. As Mathilde opens Forestier's box, she "saw first of all some bracelets, then a necklace, then a Venetian cross, gold and precious stones of admirable workmanship....a superb necklace of diamond..." (p. 3). It shows an extreme disparity and inequality between the rich, Mme. Forestier, and the poor, Mathilde. It is one of the characteristic of "the rights of private property" (principle of capitalism) in which the rich accumulate more than they need and the poor have nothing like Mathilde; the result is that there is extreme inequality and yawning gulf between the poor and the rich or the haves and have-nots. Marx and Engels (1948) say that the accumulation of surplus capital and private property has disastrous consequences and it gives rise to such problems, "the concentration of capital and land in a few hands; overproduction and crises; ... inevitable ruin proletariat, the anarchy in production, the crying inequalities in the distribution of wealth" (p. 29). Actually the problems of people, like Mathilde, are created by the rich people, like Forestier, as the limited resources of the state are concentrated in the few hands of the rich, like Forestier's precious jewels, and with poor people like Mathilde is left nothing. If Mme. Forestier's surplus jewels are nationalized or snatched away from her, then they are enough for more than hundred households and women. To remove this yawning gap between the classes and class differences, Marxism proposes "the elimination of private property and its replacement by community of property" (p. 37).

Due to class distinction, the poor class leads very miserable life. *The Necklace* shows that it is difficult for the poor to attend the social gathering. When the poor clerk and his wife, Mathilde, are invited by the Minister of Public Instruction, "instead of being delighted as her husband hoped, (Mathilde) threw the invitation on the table with disdain" (Maupassant, n. d., p. 2), because she has no dress, jewel and resources to match on the occasion. She thinks that attending social function where minister are invited is not the business of poor people as she tells her husband, "I have no dress and therefore I cannot go to the ball. Give this card to some colleague whose wife is better equipped than I" (p. 2). In the capitalist society, the working class is underrated as the class of second hand people and the social gathering where ministers are invited is often attended by the rich and elite class. Due to class perception, the poor people are often reluctant to go there lest they be scorned by the rich. When Mathilde is suggested by her husband to wear the natural flowers and attend the ball which will be attended by the Minister, she replies, "no; there is nothing more humiliating than to look poor among other women who are rich" (p. 2). As rich people often display their costly dress on the occasion and entering of the poor person in such function is but entering black bull in china shop and a fool's errand. Similarly, Mathilde is reluctant to visit her former school friend as the latter "was rich and whom she did not like to go and see any more she suffered so much when she came back" (p. 1). Perhaps entering her house and comparing her rich and prosperous status with her own arouse resentment in her. This act of Mathilde, on the one hand, shows that different economic status and disparity create gulf between friends; on the other hand, it shows that inequality is the greatest source of resentments of the poor class towards the rich as Marx says, "unequal distribution of wealth is the greatest source of class conflicts and resentments" (cited in Bakhtiar, 2005,

p. 297). Contrary to the rich people, she has sympathy with the poor little Briton peasant as the sight of her "aroused in her regrets which were despairing". It also reveals class consciousness.

In capitalism, the whole state's machinery is under the control of capitalists. All state's institutions and superstructures are used by them to increase their profit and exploit the working class. The workers are given meagre remunerations and salaries. Marxism criticizes that in "capitalist society, workers and employs are, in principle, underpaid" (Castle, 2007, p. 109).

The short story, *The Necklace*, also shows that that the workers and employs' remuneration is lower than the very basic needs. Mr. Loisel is working full time as clerk in the Ministry of Public Instruction. But he leads a hard life. He cannot afford to buy new dress for his wife. Due to his poverty, his wife is deprived of dowry, possessing not a single jewellery and ornament. His extreme poverty and poor standard of life can easily be concluded "from the poverty of (his) dwelling from the wretched look of walls, from the worn out chairs, from the ugliness of curtains" (Maupassant, n. d., p. 1). Due to his poverty, his wife is not in a position to mix with people of upper strata and suffered ceaselessly. Their meagre remuneration can be easily estimated from their work. As they have to pay thirty six thousand francs for the necklace which they have purchased for replacing the lost necklace of Forestier. They arrange eighteen thousand from their own and borrow the rest, eighteen thousand, from the other people. To pay the due back, both of them work hard. The clerk jumps into two additional jobs and works till late hours and his wife also becomes a beast of burden. This hard life of their labour lasts for ten years "and at the end of ten they (have) paid" (p. 5). Simply, to pay only eighteen thousand francs, they both work hard for ten years. It shows the underpayment and meagre remuneration and payment to workers, which is the hall mark of capitalism. Pertaining to this, Marx and Engels (1848) tell about the lot of poor class in these words, "There have always been *poor* and *working classes*; and those who worked were almost always the poor" (p. 37), because their remuneration is not adequate.

In Capitalism, the big capitalists possess all means of subsistence and production, and the wealth, and the poor people or proletariats just depend on them. So the poor and working class is just reduced to a dependant class (p. 38). *The Necklace* also tells the dependency of poor people on the rich class. Poor Mathilde is not in a position to attend the ball as she has no ornament to wear. Therefore, she applies to Mm. Forestier, a rich friend, who has accumulated more than she needed. After the loss of the necklace, Mathilde and her husband are not in position to buy a new one to compensate the rich lady, Mme. Forestier. Therefore, they borrow money from others and it takes a long, ten years, to pay back. So the life of Mathilde and her husband is nothing but a horrible tale of dependency.

In capitalism, due the right of private property and minimum interference of state in economic life of people (uncontrolled economy), people become greedy and leave no stone unturned to maximize their profit by any mean. Especially, the rich class exploits the poor by using different techniques. Marxism criticizes this act of profit maximization as exploitation of men by men or "the exploitation of one part of society by other" (Marx, & Engels, 1948, p. 26). The short story, *The Necklace*, also reveals that capitalists or rich class exploits the needy and destitute. Poor Mathilde and her husband need heavy sum to purchase the substitute necklace. In this perilous situation, they have not been helped by the rich people; rather, the latter lend them money by charging high interest rate. They

(Mathilde and her husband) sign affidavits with usurers to affirm that they will meet their conditions. The writer describes their dealing in these words:

Loisel "took up ruinous obligation dealt with usurers, all the race of lenders. He compromised all the rest of his life, risked his signature without even knowing if he could meet it; and frightened by the pains yet to come, by the black misery which was about to fall upon him.... (Maupassant, n.d., p. 4).

The poor clerk and his wife also make bargain with jeweler at Palais Royal that in case they found the lost necklace then the jeweler will buy it back on thirty four thousand. Thus, he will get two hundred francs as a profit. Their debt is rescheduled by charging interests rates as they pay it back after ten years "with the rate of usury and the accumulation of compound interests" (p. 5). The attitude of jewellers and money lenders is similar to the pragmatic attitude of modern capitalist corporate-class that is doing nothing with ethics and morality but has only one objective -that is profit maximization at any cost regardless the consequences for others.

Marxism also criticizes capitalism where rich class becomes richer and the poor poorer. In capitalism, "the great mass of the people are more and more falling into the proletariat, their situation becoming more wretched and intolerable in proportion to the increase of wealth of the bourgeoisie" (Marx & Engels, 1948, p. 48). The poor class cannot bear a slight shock as it is also at low ebb. The short story also highlights this impasse. The poor family considers the incident of losing the necklace a tragic incident. It ruins the life of poor clerk and his wife. From the very beginning their standard of life is not good. But after the loss of the necklace, belonging to rich lady, Mme. Forestier, their life becomes more miserable, as they get loan with high interest rates to replace it. It has formidable impact on the life of poor family. They realized that the dreadful debt must be paid back; therefore, "They dismissed their servant: they changed their lodgings; they rented a garret under the roof" (Maupassant, n.d., p. 5). The life of Mathilde becomes more miserable. With a great difficulty, she would have to do house chores and hard work simultaneously to save the money. Her husband, despite his office work, engages himself in two more additional works, in order to get rid of the highest interests based debt. After ten years of constant labour, Mathilde no longer remains the prettiest girl, who in past moved the people, including Minister of Public Instruction at the ball. Now she is tough, rough and completely changed. Even his friend, Mme. Forestier, does not recognize her changed face. Such is the situation of poor class. On the other hand, money lenders have been benefitted from their (Mathilde and her husband) hard works because they receive the surplus amount as usury from poor Mathilde and her husband. *The Necklace* shows the declining status of the poor family which becomes poorer but the rich people get profit at the expense of the poor family. Thus, it is another important aspect of capitalism where rich class becomes richer and the poor poorer.

Similarly, the owner of jewellery and necklace, the rich "Mme Forestier is still young still beautiful and still charming" (p. 5), shows the prosperous life of rich class which cannot be easily shaken by the trivial incident like of Mathilde and her husband.

Capitalists believe that they have got superior status due their supreme brains and talents. But to Marxists, such kind of "class-based beliefs are at some level illusory" (Castle, 2007, p. 111). Bakhtiar (2005) in his book, *Political Philosophy Western*, quotes Marx who says that human being is equal by nature but it is the emergence of private property which brings class difference. The short story, *The Necklace*, also tells that richness is not the faculty of talent or beauty. Mathilde is a poor girl and no one desires to look at her

but when equipped with “elegant dress and ornaments”, she surpasses the girls belonging to elite class in the ball. Her pose, intoxicated dance and bearing impress everyone at the social event attending by the Minister of Public Instruction. On the day of the ball:

[Mathilde] made a great success. She was prettier than them all, elegant, gracious, smiling and crazy with joy. All men looked at her, asked her name, endeavoured to be introduced. All the attached of the Cabinet wanted to be waltz with her. She was remarked by the minister himself. (Maupassant, n.d., p. 3)

She is praised by everyone. She carries the day and the laurel of victory is on her head. The writer shows that the poor, if equipped with finance, can also show their talents and surpass the rich like Mathilde. It also critiques the shallow and perverted thinking of capitalist class which judges something superficially on the bases of external look and outer form and ignores the natural born talent which may even be found in the poor. This is an important aspect of “false consciousness” of the rich class and capitalism.

The end of the story reveals the traces of a class conflict, as poor Mathilde declares openly that Mme. Forestier is responsible for her past misery and accuses that she (Mathilde) has suffered because of her. She tells her, “Yes, I have had days hard enough, since I have seen you, days wretch enough-and that because of you” (p. 5).

Conclusion

The short story, *The Necklace*, portrays a society from Marxist point of view. It depicts the actual picture of classed-society which is divided into two classes on the basis of economic conditions. It reveals that there is an extreme disparity and economic gap between the upper and lower classes: the haves and have-nots. Due to unequal distribution of wealth, the rich people enjoy life and the poor suffer which also arouses resentment in the poor class towards the rich. Due to class distinction, people belonging to the lower class cannot mix with the upper class. Workers are underpaid and deprived of the basic needs of life. People belonging to the poor class always depend on the rich class and due to their dependency they are exploited by the rich. The rich class accumulates wealth by any mean, regardless the consequences for others. People belonging to the lower class suffer throughout their life and a slight economic shock may destroy their entire career. *The Necklace* also shows that class distinction ultimately ends in resentment and conflict. The writer portrays the picture of poor people in such a way which stimulates fellow feelings for the poor. Thus, looking through the lens of Marxist theory, one may find that *The Necklace* is a powerful expression of class distinction and resistance.

Recommendations

The research has illuminated the unexplored Marxist theme of class distinction in the short story, *The Necklace*, and thus highlighting the potential area for carrying out research in various aspects of Marxism in the story. The research also recommends the researchers to use the same method used by this study to explore the theme of class distinction in other works including narrative fiction and short stories.

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