

Mutualistic Symbiosis Between Two Classes in Rumaan Alam's *Leave the World Behind*

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Abstract:

This study examines how the upper and middle classes have a mutual interaction in Rumaan Alam's novel *Leave the World Behind*. The data for this study were collected from selected scenes and dialogues where characters from different social classes meet and interact. The collected data were analyzed using a Marxist perspective on class relations. The finding shows that George and Ruth, who are upper class, and Clay and Amanda, who are middle class, are able to work together as a group to solve common problems or face threatening external forces despite the difference in their social class. The finding indicates that the novel depicts class struggle and mutualistic relationships in a unique way. Finally, this study argues that Alam's novel reveals the complex relationship between classes by noting that despite class conflict, a win-win situation can also be achieved during times of crisis. This study enriches the understanding of the nature of class relations representation in post-conflict literature and broadens the scope by incorporating the concept of cooperation.

Keywords: Social class; differences; relationship; mutualistic; crisis

Abstrak:

Penelitian ini meneliti bagaimana kelas atas dan menengah saling berinteraksi dalam novel *Leave the World Behind* karya Rumaan Alam. Data untuk penelitian ini dikumpulkan dari beberapa adegan dan dialog yang dipilih di mana karakter dari kelas sosial yang berbeda bertemu dan berinteraksi. Data yang terkumpul dianalisis dengan menggunakan perspektif Marxis tentang hubungan kelas. Temuan menunjukkan bahwa George dan Ruth, yang merupakan kelas atas, serta Clay dan Amanda, yang merupakan kelas menengah, dapat bekerja sama sebagai sebuah kelompok untuk memecahkan masalah bersama atau menghadapi kekuatan eksternal yang mengancam meskipun ada perbedaan kelas sosial. Temuan ini mengindikasikan bahwa novel ini menggambarkan perjuangan kelas dan hubungan mutualistik dengan cara yang unik. Akhirnya, penelitian ini berargumen bahwa novel Alam mengungkapkan hubungan yang kompleks antara kelas-kelas dengan mencatat bahwa meskipun ada konflik kelas, situasi yang saling menguntungkan juga dapat dicapai selama masa krisis. Penelitian ini memperkaya pemahaman tentang sifat representasi hubungan kelas dalam literatur pascakonflik dan memperluas cakupannya dengan memasukkan konsep kerja sama.

Kata kunci: Kelas sosial; perbedaan; hubungan; saling menguntungkan; krisis

INTRODUCTION

Leave the World Behind by Rumaan Alam, published in 2020, is a novel that presents the exciting story of two families, white privileged and wealthy and black privileged and rich, who are compelled to depend on each other during a strange accident. Nevertheless, the relations between these families and how they share dependency during the crisis are fascinating to Marxist analysis, more precisely, class differences between them. In this analysis, researchers consider how interactions between characters reflect complex dynamics involving class, racial, and social hierarchies.

This research explains how literature reflects the times and comments on the developing human condition. Through this approach, the novel contributes significantly to the ongoing debate about the role of literature in understanding and criticizing contemporary society, thus promoting a deeper understanding of the relevance and importance of literature in a changing world.

While race, class, and crisis are underlying themes in *Leave the World Behind*, this paper analyzes how critics have predominantly cast the novel regarding race, privilege, and the impending global catastrophe. Though the families are of different social and economic backgrounds, there is no straightforward menacing from one family to the other. Alam excludes two families and teaches the concept of dependency or mutualism; the two families depend on each other for survival. This will not benefit the Marxist impression that class relations can only be exploitative but may change during a crisis. Researchers analyze the novel reflecting the Marxist understanding of class struggle, the role of money, and power.

In this paper, the concept of mutualistic symbiosis is the Marxist approach to class relations in *Leave the World Behind* that should receive more consideration in further work. Unlike other Marxist literature wherein themes of class struggle and oppression dominate, the book provides a leveraged struggle between the two families who must band together to survive. The crisis puts both families in a situation where they are placed on the same level and cannot dominate or exploit each other.

Rumaan Alam's *Leave the World Behind* has been explored in the context of climate change and lexical repetition. As the article by Caracciolo states, one of the intriguing analyses by critics was the focus on an omniscient narrator as an attempt to emulate the

hesitancy concerning the climate crisis. Caracciolo (2022) highlights that the novel employs narrative strategies to subvert readers' expectations and emulate environmental instability. In addition, Bezrukov and Bohovyk (2023) found that the phenomenon of lexical repetition correlates with the author's strategy and the novel's structure. It emphasizes some components of the paragraphs and excludes others, providing their semantic cohesion. However, many social class and economic divide issues remain unexplored in the novel *Leave the World Behind*. Nevertheless, the conflict between the middle class renting the house for dwelling, Clay and Amanda, and the higher-class homeowners, G.H. and Ruth, provides a solid social and economic power struggle insidiously built into the story.

Using a Marxist approach, this research addresses a gap in the literature on how the novel satirizes and rejects capitalist values, class conflict, and economic inequality. In particular, it would examine how the approach of the disaster intensifies these class dynamics and show how socio-economic status determines who has access to resources, protection, and agency in an environmental emergency. This analysis would develop from Caracciolo's perspective on the uncertainty of the novel's themes of power and privilege in the light of socio-economic environments and collapse to a socio-economic assessment of the novel's themes.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Class Social

Marxist criticism, founded in the ideas of Karl Marx, is a method for the analysis of literature that results from the perspectives of economic relations, classes, and materialisms in terms of the affectation of the relation between characters as well as the formation of stories. As a critical analytical tool for socio-economic politics, Marxist criticism unmasks different texts' capacity to critique or condone capitalist systems and social relations.

According to Marx and Engels (1848:6), in a capitalist society and system, the bourgeoisie is the highest stratum. The ruling class controls the means of production and ownership, such as factories, land, houses, and the resources necessary for production. The bourgeoisie is compounded to make profits by extracting surplus value from workers' labor. In other words, they hire workers (the proletariat class) but do not actively

participate in production. However, their wealth comes from capital assets ownership and control instead of profit-making and money circulation. Nevertheless, Marx and Engels claimed that the bourgeoisie finished their historic mission by becoming the dominant class that relied on labor exploitation as the main driving force, and this fact would contribute to its elimination. In literature, the bourgeoisie is the educated and wealthy class that owns, controls, and dominates culturally, economically, and politically. It reproduces itself through institutions such as education, media, and government.

In contrast, the proletariat is the class of people who do not own productive properties and have to offer their labor in the markets in order to support themselves and their families. Capitalist society sees the proletarian as an exploitable class by the bourgeoisie since they are the ones who produce both wealth and income. However, the latter receives only a tiny portion of the former's worth. This is the creation of extra value or the difference between the worker's wages and the product of his work and the bourgeoning of the bourgeoisie class through this exploitation while class keeps the workers jobless and penniless or dependent. Marx and Engels emphasized in their book *The Communist Manifesto* that the proletariat, as a revolutionary class based on their experience of exploitation and numerical superiority, can overthrow the capitalist system through revolution and establish a classless communist society. In literature, the proletariat is that segment of society considered the lower class or the oppressed due to poor living conditions. Many authors present their biographies as full of work, lack of money, and injustices in society, stressing the role of oppression they are subjected to in the capitalist world.

Mutualistic Symbiosis in Relationship

Boucher et al. (1982) explain that mutualism is the kind of relationship between two species in which they benefit in some way. This may be in direct contact, which involves interaction between the two species, or indirect, in which the two species do not come into contact with each other but benefit from each other. Some of the exchanges that make mutualism possible include nutrient exchange, protection, exchange of energy, and transport services like pollination or seed dispersal. They are accepted as an essential type of ecological interaction, which directly or indirectly affects population regulation, community, and species formation and development. From the perspective of human

interactions, mutualism can manifest in several ways, and both parties in the relationship are heirs. These include romantic relationships, Friendships, business relationships, teacher/student relationships, and support systems. In such interactions, mutualism is all about the symbiosis process where the parties involved gain from one another, increasing the bond of the relationship and improving the standard of living of everybody.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study used the Marxist framework to qualitatively investigate *Leave the World Behind* regarding class conflict, dialectics, and domination. In this research, critical scenes from the novel involve the comparison and contestation between the two classes of people, especially the meeting of the two families and their negotiations on assets. The research utilized Marxist theory, including Karl Marx's assertion that "The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles" (Marx & Engels, 1848, p.3), as well as Louis Althusser's concept of ideology: 'Ideology is the imaginary relation men maintain with their real conditions of existence' (Althusser, 1971, p. 30). Additionally, Antonio Gramsci's hegemonic theory, which addresses power relations sustained by culture and politics, was applied to interpret the shift in class relations during the crisis, reflected in the quote, "The crisis consists precisely in the fact that the old is dying and the new cannot be born" (Gramsci, 1971, p. 47). This paper also looked at the use of the novel in relation to other aspects of the text that serve as a metaphor and symbolism, for example, home and technology signifying power and ownership. Furthermore, secondary sources like Terry Eagleton's idea that literature mirrors socio-economic relations (Eagleton, 1976, p.32) and Fredric Jameson's insights on ideological narratives were used to support the analysis of class relations depicted in this post-capitalist crisis narrative, reflecting mutualistic symbiosis between the two families.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Mutualistic Symbiosis: Blurring the Class Boundaries

Amanda and Clay are middle-class because of their job and their lifestyle. "Amanda was the account director, Jocelyn's account supervisor, and one of her three direct reports in the parlance of the modern office." (p. 9). The fact that Amanda is an account director indicates that she is competent and has succeeded in her work. The titles and jobs assigned

to Amanda are essential in the lives of individuals in this society. In many contemporary organizations, roles and position prescriptions define how people envision themselves and how others envision those people. Nevertheless, account directors' occupations are regarded as middle-class because of their average salaries, the tasks they are provided with, and the type of employment. Since account directors hold senior positions across many industries, especially in marketing, finance, and business services, their income falls within the middle-class income earners category. However, this may differ depending on the industry and region in question.

As mentioned in *2024 In-Demand Finance and Accounting Roles and Hiring Trends* (2024), some of the most searching for positions include financial managers and account directors, which are responsibilities that are paid well and, frequently, can be compared to the middle to the upper middle-income brackets in most of the developed countries. In addition, “Clay? He’s a professor. English, but also media studies.” (Alam, 2020, p. 68). Clay’s job as a university professor earns a good salary. However, he is not an exceptionally high one, and he is represented as a confident middle-class person who is financially secure enough but does not live lavishly. His profession entails him and his family into cultural capital but may not enable him to be the economic capital of the upper-class wealth. Kochhar (2024) claims that almost six of ten or more workers were considered middle class in 2022, with education and office work included.

Amanda and Clay’s lifestyle, such as their residence and car, also shows that they are people from the middle social class. “‘We live in Brooklyn. Carroll Gardens ... It’s really Cobble Hill,’ Amanda said.” (Alam, 2020, p. 50) reflects Amanda’s effort to locate herself within specific social and economic preconditioning conditions. Both Carroll Gardens and Cobble Hill are the neighborhoods located in Brooklyn. There are some significant differences in the ranking of the popularity and status. “The car was not so new as to be luxurious nor so old as to be bohemian. A middle-class thing for middle-class people, engineered not to offend more than to appeal...” (Alam, 2020, p. 8) The car is introduced as belonging to neither the ‘luxury car’ category, referred to as flashy and exclusive nor the ‘bohemian’, associated with out-of-date and vintage cars. Described as being ‘engineered not to offend more than to appeal,’ which can be understood as meaning unassuming, conservative, and deliberately unglamorous. This reflects how middle-class



individuals often navigate societal expectations: People often do not want to be too provocative or attract too much attention, but at the same time, they do not wish to look unfashionable or feel threatened. Moreover, the fact that the car is described as ‘middle-class’ tells us a lot about Amanda and Clay, their typical ‘middle-class’ lifestyle, living in a world of average wealth and ordinary comforts. It signifies their need to blend in without standing out, which reflects middle-class status, whose norms promote the paring off of the usual and strange. According to Suter et al. (2020), the middle class uses the symbolization of consumption to establish its identity, separate itself from the lower classes, and not endanger the position of the upper classes.

“We’re going to have solar panels put up... My contractor told me he generates enough that he sells power back to the grid.” (Alam, 2020, p. 88). This shows how G.H. invested in renewable energy and earned money. The upper class has the power and control over resources. It portrays capitalist social relations because they can procure innovations and gain advantages in ways that financially reassert their power. On the other hand, while the working-class characters invest in real estate to stem declining returns on their property, Amanda and Clay, the middle-class characters, can only rent the house and certainly cannot afford to make the necessary investments, not to mention profit from them. Therefore, G. H.’s solar panels are not only part of an environmental initiative; they embody the tendencies of today’s capitalist society where the upper-class representatives can only enhance their status and expand their advantages. Although Amanda and Clay appear to desire middle-class life, the predatory capacity of G.H. illustrates how upper-class people exploit their privileges to create even more separation between themselves and the lower class.

“This didn’t seem to her like the sort of house where black people lived.” (Alam, 2020, p. 32). In this case, Amanda unconsciously assumes that a Black person would not own such a luxurious house and represents society’s stereotype about people of color regarding the issue of race and class. This demonstrates that it is possible to compartmentalize social class considerations along with racial attitudes. “What if he’s the handyman? What if she’s the maid? What if this is just a scam...” (Alam, 2020, p. 41) Amanda’s reaction to the arrival of G.H. and Ruth also shows how she has some prejudices about black people and the kind of jobs they can do as she immediately assumes



that they would be cleaning her house and this immediately tells of her racist and classist thinking. Heller's concept of class struggle demonstrates how ideologies perpetuate such schemes, pointing to the state, culture, and ideology as critical to maintaining class divisions (Heller, 2018). Amanda's principles apply to her when she preserves her class and color, that of the capitalist class, and her prejudice regarding the unequal distribution of classes and color.

Amanda's behavior toward G. H. and Ruth, the black couple in *Leave the World Behind*, in which she is convinced that just due to the color of their skin, they have to be there to clean her house, is a good representation of a form of class struggle as informed by race and economic bias on the idea of conflict bourgeoisie working-class world as described by Ricardo Antunes. This reaction depicts how racism and classism work hand in hand, as race is a way of referring to a person's status and position within the labor force. As Mezzadra (2019) states, class struggle is also at the heart of the development of capitalism, and it is a historical factor. This difficulty indicates the existence of a power struggle among different social groups, in which class inequalities contradict state authority and are connected to the process of proletarianization and commodification of labor. Furthermore, Antunes (2020) explains in his framework that class struggle is not only, and most importantly, reduced to, economic oppression but also social relations and discriminations that tear the working class to shreds. This may explain Amanda's reaction, and it is also in line with what Antunes refers to as the fragmentation of the working class. Amanda's classist and racist assumptions put people into categories: domestic work is done by certain people of color because the nature of the job requires it.

By the time when the mysterious crisis is not resolved, the two families become dependent on each other. "You know, you could stay. If you wanted.' Ruth offers a safe space to Amanda's family during the crisis, which is a significant moment of cooperation and solidarity between the two families." (Alam, 2020, p. 149) This quote illustrates how people from distinct class statuses can fraternize and share reciprocal benefits even in the worst-case scenarios. It is important to stress that Ruth's providing shelter to Amanda's family exemplifies class cooperation, which promises the working-class people a common benefit, contrary to the Marxist vision of irremovable enmity between the classes. In contrast to exploitation and division, the two families are presented by the author as

joining forces in a kind of struggle to create class solidarity and survival outside the framework of capitalist society. “We have food, and a roof, and G. H. has some money, and we have one another. We’re not alone.” (Alam, 2020, p. 153) reveals that people from different classes often cross over and interact with each other throughout a crisis for survival, most probably reciprocating. The concern over the basics of food and shelter overcomes money and common greed, causing a temporary reversal of the typical capitalist order. Thus, the novel also focuses on Marxist premises of envisioning the temporary elimination of differences between a class and others and the ability for individuals to work for the common good and respect one another.

Even in extreme situations, class boundaries can dissolve as individuals from different socio-economic backgrounds work together for mutual benefit. “Amanda went and stood in the kitchen, unsure what to do next. Ruth followed because she was moved to reassure her. That damnable instinct. She had to help. They were colleagues not as mothers but humans. This—all this—was a problem to be shared.” (Alam, 2020, p. 164) Ruth's intuition to help Amanda proved that all concepts of class difference fade away when people only focus on surviving. The scene concurs with the Marxist point of view by portraying how unity and cooperation can supplant the authority and subjugation typical for a capitalist society for a period to offer an equivalent chance to transform as far as class division is concerned.

CONCLUSION(S)

In *Leave the World Behind*, Rumaan Alam explores social class and identity and how a crisis breaks established norms and directs people toward specific behaviors and feelings. In the beginning, Amanda and Clay (middle-class) and George and Ruth (upper-class) are class-conscious, which is evident from their employment, ability to secure resources, and social status. However, as the show progresses, those differences blur, and viewers discover the Marxist idea of uniting in crisis over basic needs. This is a critical look at social class and power, whereby each character, championing a different class, comes together to fight a shared enemy when forced to initially share a common language, emotional appeal, and bargaining. Finally, the narrative points to the fact that moments of crisis uncover class responsiveness, thus raising the question of whether a class divide can be created for a more harmonious society after a catastrophe.

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