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ABSTRACT

This study examines Preeti Shenoy's novel, A Place Called Home, through the prism of Karl Marx's Conflict Theory to explore how economic systems maintain servitude for the interests of the ruling class's domination. The situations of Mrs. Shetty, Seema, and Alka portray the game of power, coercion, and resistance and how the forces of oppression are maintained as well as challenged. Seema's labour is commodified, her silence legitimized by the specter of unemployment and economic uncertainty. This is pure false consciousness, where the proletariat internalises exploitative ideologies and adapts to their own subordination. Alka's education, by contrast, inspires class consciousness in her, such that she learns to identify with and challenge those forces that propel her into niches. Class structure is validated by their very exclusion from privilege centers and the pervasive remembrance of their place at the bottom of all household items. Their labour maintains capitalist exploitation, restricting mobility and ensuring dependence. Mrs. Shetty's authority extends past wages—she controls access to goods and privilege, using benevolence as an instrument of oppression. Mrs. Shetty redefines exploitation as charity, framing Alka's education as a gift and not a right, concealing inequality and suppressing rebellion. The expectation that Alka will follow Seema, institutionalizes class oppression, but her rebellion disrupts the cycle. Seema urges Alka to embrace their fate, internalised servitude, as fleeting pleasures—such as Sunday outings—do not alter their subordination. Her gratitude towards Mrs. Shetty ensures continued subordination, suppressing revolt. Alka's ideological break—her bold insistence on a heater—constitutes an insistence on dignity. Mrs. Shetty's denial and accusations of greed underscore structural power imbalances. Psychological manipulation, emotional blackmail, and economic dependence are tools of oppression, but Alka's resistance shows that even the most oppressive structures can be transcended. Her transformation from an obedient girl to oppositional force is an expression of the proletariat's capacity to reclaim freedom. From a Marxist point of view, her transformation satirises structural inequality while affirming resistance, proving that rebellion is not just possible—but unavoidable.

Keywords: Relationship, Class, Consciousness, Resistance, Preeti Shenoy

1. INTRODUCTION:

According to Al-Lehaibi (2015), competing sets of interests contribute to the dynamic nature of social life, which, in turn, causes conflict and induces social interaction [1]. There are different theories of human relations like Social Action theory, Conflict theory, Interdependence theory, Attachment theory, Social Exchange theory etc. The current study examines the select novel of Preeti Shenoy from the point of view of Marxian Conflict theory. Saroj and Danhju (2019) highlight that Karl Marx offered a theory of capitalism based on his idea that human beings are basically productive - in order to survive, people have to work [2]. This theory perceives society as a battleground of ongoing struggle, with power

relations and economic interests establishing social structures and relationships. Social order, according to this theory, is not founded on cooperation or consensus but on coercion and dominance, whereby the dominant class exercises domination over institutions, laws, and ideologies to sustain its privileged status. Siahaan, M. I., & Satria, R. (2022) assert that conflict can trigger the process towards creating social balance [3]. Conflict Theory focuses on the fact that society is inherently divided along the lines of control over resources like wealth, power, and status. The means of production is owned and controlled by the bourgeoisie or capitalist class, while the working class or proletariat is compelled to sell its labor for wages. This is exploitative in nature since the capitalist class aims at getting the maximum amount of profits through the reduction of wages and retaining the power of production. This brings about economic inequality, which gives rise to social inequality where the rich keep accumulating more and more resources, and the working class can barely manage basic needs. Marx believed that this economic arrangement gives rise to a state of class antagonism in which the bourgeoisie and the proletariat have fundamentally opposing interests. The ruling class employs means like political power, education, and media to authenticate its supremacy and refrain the working class from acknowledging its oppression. This process, described as "false consciousness," discourages the proletariat from joining together and opposing the system. As the exploitation intensifies, however, class consciousness sets in—where the working class realises its shared oppression and organises to fight the existing order. This results in class struggle, the force behind historical transformation, as the oppressed attempt to topple the ruling system and create a more just society. Marxian Conflict Theory also posits that social institutions, including government, law, religion, and education, are designed to serve the interests of the ruling class and perpetuate its dominance. Marx felt that the only way to end this ongoing struggle was through a radical restructuring of society, where capitalism would give way to socialism or communism. In such a vision, the means of production would be owned collectively, wealth would be shared more equally, and social classes would eventually disappear. He saw history as a succession of class struggles, with each period characterized by battles between oppressors and the oppressed—such as feudal lords and serfs in medieval society or capitalists and workers in contemporary industrial society. The ultimate result of this conflict, according to Marx, would be a proletarian revolution that would create a classless, stateless society in which resources are allocated based on need and not profit. In general, Conflict Theory gives us a negative perspective from which to examine social structures, maintaining that inequality and power conflicts are not accidental but inherent in how societies operate. It remains dominant in sociological theory and helps to fuel social justice movements, labour rights efforts, and broader systemic reform movements. Although critics maintain that the theory could be ignoring some cases of social cooperation and stability, its conclusions are still pertinent in explaining economic inequalities, labour exploitation, and institutional discrimination that continue to be present in today's societies.

2. OBJECTIVES:

The objectives of this paper are listed below:

- (1) To analyse the class divisions portrayed in the novel.
- (2) To explore how awareness of class differences leads to resistance.
- (3) To analyse the role of education in empowering individuals to challenge social hierarchies.

3. REVIEW OF LITERATURE/ RELATED WORKS:

Bibi et al (2021) through their study conclude that not only, in the novel the class conflict has been disclosed but also it has been argued that the upper classes always exploit the lower classes for their own gain. From the characters it has been sought to demonstrate that the lower level of society is being misused at the hands of the upper classes [4].

Bakhtawar et al (2024) draw the conclusion that the study acts as a critique of the pervasive caste- and class-based inequality in capitalist society in addition to highlighting the exploitation and prejudice experienced by the lower working class [5].

According to Singh & Kumari (2023), Preeti Shenoy's novels not only expose society but also lead it down more constructive routes. Women today are brave enough to take on any kind of responsibility [6].

Sivasubramanian & Antony (2024) conclude that Preeti Shenoy's novels weave together themes of love, loss, personal development, and sociocultural dynamics to create a complex tapestry of modern Indian life. Readers in India and beyond have fallen in love with her because of her likable characters and easy-to-follow narrative. This study emphasizes Shenoy's contribution to current Indian writing as well as her capacity to encapsulate the spirit of contemporary Indian realities [7].

As stated by Saleem et al (2024) the novels depict numerous instances of class conflict and that the oppressed people's eventual exploitation leads to poverty and injustice. It also concludes that nearly all of the characters and content of the novels contain specific themes of Marxist theory of class conflict [8].

As per Kumari (2022), Preeti Shenoy's novels have reinvented womanhood in terms of her strength, courage, self-direction, self-sufficiency, equality, power, and success. Most importantly, Shenoy writes that women are the primary creators of the civilization of the future [9].

Zafar et. al. (2023) highlight that Karl Marx observed that the rude behaviour of an elite class is just because of the money, it's money that makes them like so [10].

Sharanbalaji (2022) claims that Indian bestsellers have brought a tremor in the literary world not through any mammoth revolution but through simplicity that has made them achieve greater heights [11].

According to Madgafurova (2023) interpersonal relations significantly influence many aspects of people's lives, such as physical and mental health, social support, and general satisfaction with life [12].

Prayogi et al. (2025) states that the relationship between class conflict and literature is deeply intertwined, influencing both the production and reception of literary works [13].

4. MATERIALS AND METHODS:

Using a qualitative methodology, this study analyses Preeti Shenoy's novel using close reading. *A Place Called Home* is the novel selected for this study. The narrative structure, character development, and thematic content of this work are all addressed. Secondary materials such as scholarly papers, author interviews, and literary reviews are also referred.

5. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION:

According to Bishoyi & Vijayanand (2022), one of Preeti Shenoy's distinguishing characteristics is her attempt to replicate traditional ethical principles and approaches in her novels [14]. The social hierarchy continues to exist through generations as seen with the interaction of Mrs. Shetty, Seema, and Alka. Alka's social mobility is affected by economic differences even when she goes to the same school as Tanvi, upholding master-servant relationships. A Marxist perspective makes evident how structural impediments consciously perpetuate the dominance of the ruling class by keeping the working class trapped in their positions. Seema's refusal to let Alka break away from subservience is an expression of internalised capitalist thinking where submission equals survival. Although her sacrifices are motivated by love and aspirations for a better future for Alka, they are expressions of how the proletariat is conditioned to accept exploitation. Economic subordination and ideological domination, as described by Karl Marx, serve to repress opposition and perpetuate the dominance of the ruling class. Seema's dismissal of Alka's rebellion highlights how ruling-class ideologies take root in the oppressed, perpetuating subordination. Yet within these repressive systems, Seema and Alka's bond promotes resilience and nascent resistance. Their mutual struggle produces solidarity, a crucial Marxist component capable of mobilising collective action. Alka's increasing consciousness of inequality marks an unconscious resistance to power.

Seema's thankfulness to Mrs. Shetty is a manifestation of a class-oppressed worldview where she is conditioned to see victimisation as normal. Marxist Conflict Theory contextualises the disparity of power between Mrs. Shetty and her servants as a natural conflict between the bourgeoisie and proletariat. Mrs. Shetty exercises power through the exploitation of Seema's work and deprivation of her minimum needs such as warmth and proper food. Issuing Alka a heater would have represented class hierarchy and subjugation, passing off as a gift from the ruling class. Education, defined as a luxury instead of a right, becomes yet another weapon of economic subservience, discouraging assertions of equity. Mrs. Shetty maintains her authority by establishing economic dependence and discouraging united resistance. Depriving Alka of a heater is a psychological tool to make the working class comply.

Seema's response to Alka's request for a heater demonstrates Marxist false consciousness. Her insistence that Alka not protest against Mrs. Shetty portrays internalised oppression, which eventually benefits the ruling class by stopping workers from acknowledging their collective power. Her threat of homelessness highlights the economic dependency that ties the proletariat to the bourgeoisie, guaranteeing submission and deterring rebellion. Capitalist regimes impose survival through subordination, deterring resistance. Conversely, Alka's behavior is the dawn of class consciousness. Her insistence on a heater is not greed but a call for fairness and dignity, a departure from her mother's subservient mentality. Her refusal to apologise to Mrs. Shetty is a dawning awareness of systemic exploitation, reminiscent of Marx's contention that revolutionary transformation starts with an awareness of class oppression.

The master-servant relationship in the novel, is also a demonstration of the way symbolic exclusion maintains power. In being in the Shetty home, Seema and Alka are not accorded the same privileges, which helps to reinforce their subordination. This economic and spatial segregation is a mechanism of oppression by class that makes them forever reliant upon Mrs. Shetty's so-called largesse. The servants' quarters, where Seema and Alka share meals of leftovers, concretely symbolise their subordinate social standing. Mrs. Shetty's condescending comments and frequent reminders of her economic "benevolence" impose a moral economy of debt, obliging Seema and Alka to be thankful for fundamental human rights such as shelter and education. This strategy guarantees class stratification by turning basic rights into privileges. Marxist Conflict Theory is also illustrated by Mrs. Shetty's deployment of economic dependency and emotional blackmail to keep control. By highlighting the expense of Alka's education, she invokes guilt, keeping entitlement and rebellion in check. Her sense of moral superiority enables her to couch economic support in terms of charity rather than control. Seema, anxious that resistance will compromise their fragile security, maintains class distinctions through obedience. Economic coercion, emotional manipulation, and ideological conditioning drive the working class to submissiveness. Alka's enforced display of English before Mrs. Shetty's visitors at the Inner Circle Club illustrates symbolic capital which the bourgeoisie exercises over the proletariat. Her unease at being made a spectacle betrays how hierarchical relations are institutionalised, breaking servants down to mere extensions of their master's power. Such control over language complements class domination through social conditioning and dehumanisation. Even with these constraints, Alka's increasing awareness of injustice and rebellion hold out the promise of freedom. Her resolve to work diligently and break free from servitude represents class consciousness—a recognition of systemic oppression and the necessity for change. Whereas Seema's sacrifices represent the proletariat's fight within an exploitative system, Alka's rebellion holds out the promise of ending the cycle of servitude. Her affection for her mother is a source of empowerment, illustrating how family can resist capitalist domination. Mrs. Shetty maintains her dominance by camouflaging inequality as generosity. Yet Alka's consciousness and subtle acts of resistance subvert servitude, offering the promise of class struggle. Her emotional and moral beliefs create her acts of defiance, asserting that love and resistance in groups of oppression can defy institutional limitations and power relations. The philosophy of Seema is hard work, schooling, and a good life for her daughter. She believes in the possibility of her daughter's upward mobility beyond their socioeconomic status. Seema never wanted Alka to utter a word against Mrs. Shetty.

The conversation between Seema and Alka encapsulates the internalised class struggle, revealing the psychological and structural mechanisms that reproduce economic oppression. Their contradicting perspectives—Seema's obsequious appreciation and Alka's growing frustration—illustrate how economic dependence, false consciousness, and the gradual formation of class consciousness characterise their master-servant relationship with Mrs. Shetty. Seema's comment, "She took me in when you were a newborn and I had nowhere to go." She is an angel God sent to save us" (Shenoy 2022, p. 17) [15], is typical of her intense feeling of debt towards Mrs. Shetty. However, such a sense of gratitude is not merely subjective; it is a product of economic coercion within systems. In capitalist systems, workers like Seema are socialised to internalise exploitation by perceiving their survival as being under the command of obedience. Instead of seeing Mrs. Shetty as an exploiter, Seema views her as a benefactor, despite the fact that they are in a weaker position, are lacking in autonomy, and have poor living conditions. Seema's fear of ending up on the streets—"If she turns us out, you and I will end up in the streets" (Shenoy 2022, p. 17) [15]—is a direct outcome of economic dependence, a tool the capitalist class employs to maintain the working class in a condition of weakness and servility. This fragile existence ensures that Seema will remain obedient, not due to any respect, but due to the fear of poverty.

Her economic situation denies her power of resistance, obliging her to guard Alka's behaviour to ensure that she does not undermine their precarious stability. Such a relationship shows how capitalist systems regulate the proletariat into policing their oppression, preventing rebellion before it actually emerges. Seema's emotional investment in obedience and gratitude is not a personal failing but an ingrained response to a system that equates survival with compliance.

In contrast, Alka begins to realise the inequality that she and her mother experience, and this is the beginning of class consciousness. Her indignation at being treated like a pet—"She treats me like I am some pet she has taught tricks to" (Shenoy 2022, p. 28) [15]—demonstrates her heightened sensitivity to the manner in which power is wielded within their household. Unlike her mother, who obediently acquiesces to bondage, Alka comes to know that Mrs. Shetty is not serving but exploiting her as a tool for confirming her superiority. Mrs. Shetty's insistence on making Alka speak in English before her visitors is not encouragement but a form of dominance whereby Alka becomes nothing more than an object for viewing and less of a human being. This act of humiliation bare-souls the manner in which the dominant class maintains dominance not only by economic compulsion but by ideological and social hegemony, ensuring that the working class is aware of their subservient position. Alka's fury is a harbinger for a psychological shift—one Marx saw as needed to bring down structures of oppression. Although Alka is sent to the same school as Tanvi, she is too aware that education does not come any closer to equality. Mrs. Shetty's so-called goodness in sponsoring Alka's education is performativity; it is not to raise Alka but to affirm Mrs. Shetty's own goodness, keeping Alka and Seema indebted to her. This is a key function of capitalist power: the dominant class naturalises their power by projecting acts of control as acts of benevolence. By structuring Alka's education as a privilege and not an inherent right, Mrs. Shetty maintains economic dominance over mother and daughter both, such that they still obey. This is proof of the ability of the ruling class to manage economic dependency in such a way as to close off collective resistance. While Alka gets educated, structural barriers are present to prevent effective mobility, exposing the myth of meritocracy—the idea that hard work is the only force to dismantle systemic oppression.

Alka's rise in society through education and marriage into a wealthy family is an escape from her working-class background. Although Alka achieves economic security, her working-class origins continue to determine her social status, illustrating how class oppression is not merely a matter of money but also of social and historical perception. Mrs. Shetty's ongoing power to use Alka's history as a weapon, illustrates Marx's contention that the bourgeoisie exercise control over narratives in order to preserve class structures. Even though Alka had economically improved, she was still at risk because her identity was still shaped by her background as the daughter of a maid. It is the manner in which capitalist societies make sure that even those who prosper are trapped by their existing past, upholding Marx's postulation that class struggle is inevitable within capitalist structures. Alka's challenge to Mrs. Shetty is a direct one to the authority structures that previously governed their relationship.

For years, Alka had suffered Mrs. Shetty's condescension and manipulation, but in this interaction, she stands up for herself and will not be silenced. Her behaviour can be seen as a demonstration of class struggle, where the oppressed revolt against their oppressors to claim recognition and justice. By confronting Mrs. Shetty, Alka not only reclaims her dignity but also challenges the broader social norms that sustain inequality. Her story embodies the resilience of individuals who refuse to be defined by their past and take decisive action to assert their worth in a world that often seeks to erase it.

"I want to tell you that neither my mother nor I deserved the treatment you gave us. You thought you had done my mother the biggest favour in the world, sending me to the same school as your daughter. But she gave you more in return, didn't she? She did everything for you, including cleaning up your vomit when you were ill. Ask yourself whether you treated her fairly, how you treated us, was fair. Did you think we didn't deserve kindness just because we didn't have money? What exactly was your thought process? Did you believe that we were somehow lesser than you?" (Shenoy 2022, p. 221) [15].

Alka's insistence on not being invisible and voiceless is a rebellion against a system that tried to render her invisible. Her evolution from submissiveness to self-assertion is a testament to the possibility of resistance within oppressive social systems. Karl Marx's Conflict Theory suggests that social change will result when the subordinated people gain class consciousness and consciously oppose the means of their oppression. Alka's path represents this development—from accepting subordination

passively to actively resisting and claiming her identity. Her actions demonstrate the psychological and emotional toll of suffering through class inequalities while confirming the need to dismantle them. By standing up to Mrs. Shetty, Alka asserts her voice and refuses to be erased in a world that values money and power over humanity. Her tale is a scathing critique of class struggle, identity, and resistance, showing that social mobility, much as it is praised, does not eliminate the underpinning frameworks of oppression. In her resistance, Alka upends the hierarchy that had previously governed her, highlighting the continued validity of Marxian Conflict Theory in describing social power relationships and the pursuit of justice.

6. CONCLUSION:

The present study critically examined class oppression, power relations, and economic determinism in the select novel. Through Marxist Conflict theory it is clear that Alka's life is determined by material conditions and the economic relations imposed on her by the ruling class. Her behaviour is determined not by individual rationality but by her class position and economic need. Her initial conformity—speaking English, following servitude rituals—is not just a tactical move but an ideological subordination that confines her within the system. But as she develops class consciousness, she starts to refuse this false consciousness and actively resist her exploitation. Her confrontation with Mrs. Shetty is not only a personal revolt; it represents the broader conflict between the ruling class and the working class. Mrs. Shetty, as an authority figure and a privilege, symbolises bourgeois oppression, imposing strict class structures that dehumanise and exploit the working class. Alka's resistance is a revolutionary moment, the point at which she ceases to accept the hegemonic domination of the bourgeoisie and embarks on her quest for freedom. This reflects the class struggle inherent in capitalist societies, where the dominant elite hold power through economic coercion and ideological dominance. Through this compelling narrative, the study encourages class awareness, pride, and the need to dismantle economic stratification, offering a vision of a more just and equitable world.

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