



**SPECTER OF MARX: EXTRAVAGANCE, EXPLOITATION, AND
ALIENATION IN SANTHOSH ECHIKKANAM’S “BIRIYANI” AND
JOHN STEINBECK’S *GRAPES OF WRATH***

Supriya M^{1*}, Garret Raja Immanuel S²

¹Assistant Professor of English, Sadakathullah Appa College
Rahmathnagar, Tirunelveli

²Assistant Professor of English, Nazareth Margoschis College at Pillaiyanmanai

E-mail: garretraja@gmail.com

<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6027-5450>

Received: April 09, 2024, **Accepted:** April 15, 2024, **Online Published:** June 15, 2024

ABSTRACT

After having a deep comparative study, this paper contends that both Echikkanam’s “Biriyani” and John Steinbeck’s *Grapes of Wrath* show the influence of Marxist thought. The study further examines this influence through three significant lenses: alienation, exploitation, and extravagance. The alienation section details workers’ isolation from their harvest in each story and shows a pervasive shroud of alienation haunting those who work. Secondly, as for the second bent of focus, exploitation shows how daily workers work in hard conditions and systematic suppression that divides them from those privileged. Finally, an analysis of luxury demonstrates how the capitalist class delights in decadence as impoverished multitudes struggle for bare essentials, showing a stark socio-economic contrast between two fictional worlds. This comparative study points at a current principle in Marxism concerning contemporaneous literature and presents great insights into similar thematic frameworks of “Biriyani” and *Grapes of Wrath*.

Keywords: Marxism, Extravagance, Exploitation, Suppression, and Alienation.

Introduction

Human thinking is transformed into behaviour and also social order with the help of ideas. Academic research has considerably documented the impact of ideas such as Marxism triggers on literature. For instance, Joseph C. McKenna's work, "Finding a Social Voice: The Church and Marxism in Africa," covers the rise of Marxist ideas among the sub-Saharan African people from 1968 until the mid-eighties, as well as how these affected Theodore Hesburgh's mission and pastoral work. It is a landmark in secular and theological stories, demonstrating how strong beliefs may influence the institutions dominating cultural narratives (McKenna, 1997). For example, Kirstensen and Wilhelmsson's study of the gap was pointed out by Roger Caillois as a connection with Marxism. Their work shows the influence Marxist dialectics have on their analysis of the milieu within which Caillois discussed his ideas about games created by the capitalist and neoliberal systems. This demonstrates the universal nature of Marxist influence across many fields, as far back as in literature and in times gone by (Kristensen & Wilhelmsson, 2017). Furthermore, Junaid Shabir's paper, "Marxism and Literature: An Overview", is interested in how Marxism adds another dimension to the literature study,

suggesting that history and the master-slave relation between bourgeoisie and proletariat offer a new perspective. These views allow the writers to analyse the social, economic, and political disruptions in their artistic products, which led them to significantly change the writing domain (Shabir 2016).

Comparative studies in literature show ideas' impact on writers from various cultures and periods. For instance, Naiman (2005) considers the intriguing idea of a living writer influencing a dead one through his example of Dostoevsky and Nabokov. In this study, comparative literature is shown through which later writers can shed light on the poetics of earlier works with a retrospective impact on ideas (Naiman, 2005). Cullens (2018) discusses the difficulty of comparative literary studies, notably when comparing noncanonical women writers or popular literature. However, this study reveals the challenge of synthesising cross-national innovations into women's social history using conventional literary perspectives, insinuating a broader interpretation of such artistic influences. Thatcher (1967) offers a classic case of reception analysis for the writer Nietzsche in England. This study reveals how Nietzsche's ideas penetrated England, how they affected English literature, and in what ways, and it shows



the transnational consequences of intellectualisation on writers. In the comparative literature, influence studies can be essential for understanding such things. They indicate that the writing is not in isolation but forms some intricate tapestry of literary discourse at temporal and spatial layers with a play on transforming world literature's surroundings.

Influence research is mainly related to the "French School" of comparative literature. This school dates back to the late 19th and early 20th centuries; it advocates for the direct influences between authors and texts across national literature. The French School is a historical approach to tracing the themes, genres, styles and ideas from one author or literary tradition to another. The paper compares Santhosh Echikkanam's short story "Biriyani" and John Steinbeck's novel *Grapes of Wrath*. The research focuses on analyses of the influence of Marxist ideas on both the writers irrespective of their country and era. The paper uses three aspects to analyse the influence of both works: Extravagance, Exploitation and Alienation. Through the analyses of each aspect of both works of fiction, the paper reveals the influence of Marxist ideas on both writers.

Extravagance of Money in Capitalist Society

While it is clear that extravagance of money has been a focus of so much research and talk in capitalist economies, According to W. Streeck (2012), Capitalism, in itself, tends to cause "disequilibrium and nonstop reorganisation of society" (3). As noted by D. Maynard (1985), This is due to the requirement of perpetual accumulation of capital and possessive individualism. Commonly, this process leads to structural inequality; even capitalist luxury causes social contradictions between adults and kids. It has also been criticised that such a society is inconsistent with the issue of the way of life of tech advances and the ecosystem, which leads to nature overexploitation and ecological crises, as highlighted by W. Zhong (2012). As R. Hudson (2021) pointed out, the existential challenges that capitalist economies face, including accelerated global warming, stemming from the disparity between demand for compound economic growth and the planetary ecosystem's ability to maintain it, are challenged. Moreover, Bill Lucarelli (2004) observed that the typical state of the economy is stagnation in a mature capitalist system, based on the fact that technology and exigency create irregularities in maintaining the economic drive. On the other hand, the focus of the capitalist economy on maintaining continuous

growth and consumption cannot escape similar social movements and philosophies rooted in voluntary simplicity. This revisionist form rejects the goal to work toward ever-higher levels of consumption, which would indicate that society at large needs a paradigm shift, which Amitai Etzioni (2004) describes as very important to know how capitalism's luxury has affected society and the environment at large.

Economic Inequalities

Economic disparities in society are very concerning; and the rich get richer, and the poor get poorer, as various persons and groups cause these inequalities. In the United States, nowhere has been so much attention on economic inequalities as in the headlines of business magazines; some think the "American dream" has been appropriated by the members of the richest stratum of society and, as a result, the society has gradually drifted towards becoming a class-based one (Haas, 2017). Such unevenness strengthens man's norms and competition, where society's cooperation is reduced (Sánchez-Rodríguez et al., 2019). Global phenomena suggest that economic and social disparities affect children, adolescents, and families, which makes it important to build equitable societies (Rizzini, 2002). This does not mean that class distinctions, or even wealth

itself, are unheard of in these small-scale societies or that wealth is never seen as being used in unfair ways when passed down from generation to generation (Acemoglu & Robinson, 2009); this is sometimes the case in the system of asset passing not unlike what we see in larger societies. Institution largely overshadow the particular system in which either physical, The balance between societies leads to higher and better indicators of quality-of-life meaning that the elements of economy and politics are pointed more and more towards social equity (Abel, 2016). Regarding economic inequality, it would be considered fair if it had positive outcomes from fair procedures and followed valued principles regarding the distribution of resources (Trump, 2020). These economic inequalities can also be suggested by organisational practices such as corporate social responsibility and compensation management (Bapuji et al., 2020).

Extravagance

The theme of the affluence of capitalists in literature and fiction is multidimensional, as can be seen in various works. Davis (2017) writes about how money fetishism hides the fact that living labour is its source of surplus value, which profits from financialisation and blunts clear thinking of capital. This theme can be found in the portrayal of literature where



money, more often the figure of power and control, overshadows human sensitivity in capitalist societies. As Henderson (2004) states, capitalist society's wealth is an "immense accumulation of commodities" marked by the materialism seen in capitalism (488). A similar outlook is represented in literature where the idea of amassing money and materialistic things frequently acts as a main symbol, indicative of that spirit of capitalism. Jean-Baptiste Chantoiseau (2015) notices that money is an obsession in modern novels, producing perverted aesthetics and leading to identity crisis and disillusionment. In literature, characters struggle with their sense of identity and moral values even when faced with greed in pursuing material wealth. Margaret Tudeau-Clayton, in "Shakespeare's Extravagancy" (2005), offers another theory suggesting that Shakespeare's "extravagance" can be seen as an economy of the gift, one that gives over surplus energy and traverses "proper" boundaries. This also shows a more sophisticated portrayal of capitalism in literature, where the differences between moral and economic systems are frequently blurred or questioned.

Echikanam's "Biryani" explicitly differentiates between the extravagance of capitalist society and the exploitation of the working class in Kerala. Class is divided

based on an individual's lifestyle relating to one's economy, as defined by Fuchs (2020). Echikanam depicted Kalandhan as representing Kerala's capitalist society, whose wealth accumulation from foreign land is unimaginable. It also sheds light on their surplus of wealth and its extravagant expenditure. Kalandhan Haji is the leading businessman of the village Poinaachi in Kerala, who is living his life to the lees at the age of eighty-six with his four wives, children and grandchildren. The villagers comment that Kalandhan Haji is a man of capability who can even manage with forty wives. This comment on Haji is not about his masculinity. Instead, it emphasises his potential to earn money as a capitalist. This reveals that the capitalist society focuses on achieving capital and power, which comes with acceleration, as highlighted by Fuchs(2020). He defines 'acceleration' in capitalism as the accumulation of economic, cultural and political power in a short period. This concept of acceleration can be witnessed in the portrayal of Kalandhan Haji in Echikanam's 'Biryani', whose economic extravagance paves the way for gaining his cultural and political power across the village. His grandson's reception, as narrated by the author, gives the readers a clear picture of how money is spent in a capitalist society. For instance, the money spent on imported flowers,

tonnes of basmati rice from Punjab, the diverse menu of food, etc., displays money's role in capitalist weddings. Apart from this, even Haji's home is a symbol of capitalism in the privileged society when Echikanam describes the home as "it is not a house, but a palace"(10). The house is depicted so that it can accommodate four thousand guests for the wedding. Echikanam's "Biryani" is an attempt on the extravagant side of Kerala, a state filled with leftist thoughts. Despite being a state which has been under the influence of Marxist and Communist parties for more than fifty years, capitalism and its dominance, on the other hand, is inevitable in Kerala.

The Grapes of Wrath enacts the deviation between affluent owners and miserable migrant workers. The rich landlords have sizable tracts of land and wealth, getting into arms and gas to protect their interests. While most of society is pictured as emaciated and shivering at night, discontent and disappointed feelings are growing. The pain of the dispossessed is worsened by their immense wealth and power, leaving a gaping divide between those who have everything and those who do not. Steinbeck graphically represents the landowners' profusion compared to migrant employees and farmers. The owners' detached and opulent lifestyle is

encapsulated in their approach to land management, as they discuss the poor condition of the land from their cars, seemingly indifferent to the actual land or those who labour on it: "The owner men sat in the cars and explained. You know the land is poor. You have scrabbled at it long enough, God knows" (21-24). Their extravagant investment in machinery, not for agricultural advancement but for profit maximisation, further accentuates their disregard for the workers: The ancients who lorded it over the great holdings knew the plain truth that when property concentrates in too few hands, power to take upon itself goes in addition to that or betide us what we may: "The great owners... knew the great fact: when property accumulates in too few hands it is taken away" (161), pointing out their concern regarding wealth appropriation at people's expense.

The landowners' control over the market is starkly portrayed in their manipulation of the canning industry, where their influence dictates market conditions: "A great owner bought a cannery . . . And as cannery owner he paid himself a low price for the fruit and kept the price of canned goods up and took his profit" (193-194). Additionally, their spending on arms and repression to protect their holdings illustrates their lavish and oppressive measures to maintain control:



the great owners ignored the three cries of history. The money was spent on arms and gas to protect the great holdings” (162). These portraits in the novel successfully expose an economic class disparity whereby the glamour of landlords’ lives is as far and opposite from the bleak life of dispossessed workers, sleep less former owners can ever see.

Exploitation

The increase in demand for a cheap workforce is one of the significant reasons for labour migration. This is because migrant workers replace the local workers in domestic work as they are ready to work for low wages irrespective of crucial conditions and atmosphere. Neha Misra (2007) writes that migrant workers are the preferred choice by employers due to their vulnerability and lack of choices. Moreover, this sense of choicelessness among migrant workers makes employers view them as more flexible and cooperative than local workers regarding long working hours and the low-risk factor of leaving jobs. Echikanam’s ‘Biryani’ revolves around Gopal Yadav, a migrant labourer from Jharkhand to a village in Kerala. Gopal’s choicelessness is the lack of job opportunities in his state, which eventually leads him to leave his hometown for more than fifteen years in order to save his family

from the harshness of starvation and poverty.

Roemer (1985) states that knowledge is one resource that allows capitalists to exploit their labourers, which can be seen in Echikanam’s Biryani. The story begins with the arrival of migrant labourers from West Bengal, Jharkhand and Tamilnadu. The lack of knowledge about the right pay for the work leads the migrant labourers to work for any cost when Hassainarcha tells Gopal Yadav that he would be paid Rs.250. In contrast, Malayali workers are paid Rs. 600, and Tamilians are paid Rs.500 for the same work. Gopal left the salary discrimination unquestioned and accepted the offer of Rs. 250. Gopal Yadav’s voicelessness is the representation of his subjectivity to the capitalists. Weber (1905) states this condition of a labourer as the highly probable chance of obeying the dominant’s orders by a dominated subject. This submissiveness is the key to the decisional power of the capitalist employers that paves the way for exploitation.

Another dimension of this exploitation happens due to the involvement of third parties in fixing the labour cost between the labour and the capitalist. As Steiner (1984) rightly points out, the interruption of a third party often limits the exercise of labour and makes it

impossible for them to be paid by the capitalist. Hassainarcha is the agent or third party involved in Echikanam's 'Biryani' who allots the work and cost for the labour. Even he discriminates between the wages of the migrant labourers as per their state. He strongly disapproves of Gopal Yadav's request for the wage increase, showing his authority as a third party between the employer and employee. Zukerfeld (2017) classifies capitalist exploitation into two types: commercial and non-commercial exploitation; where he defines non-commercial exploitation as the compensation received by the labourers being lesser than the contribution they make. This non-commercial exploitation is represented in Echikanam's 'Biryani', where Gopal Yadav, as well as other migrant labourers, are paid less, irrespective of their toiling jobs. Apart from this unjust pay, these migrant workers are exploited by drugs in exchange for work. Zukerfeld (2017) highlights the term super-exploitation in his thoughts on capitalism, stating that super-exploitation is the availability of huge replaceable workers with abundant skills and energy. Echikanam portrayed the reality of super-exploitation in 'Biryani', where the migrant workers' energy and skills are extracted at an undeserving cost unrelated to their work. The story reveals the pathetic situation of

migrant workers who work for more than ten hours and are paid less with no food and accommodation.

The Grapes of Wrath also shows the exploitation by rich landowners and workers' misfortunes, which can be well reflected through symbolism. It shows that the landlords accumulate resources at the margin of worker migration and mistreatment. The text says that only a few farmers were left on earth with the farm size expanding and its possessors decreasing. It also shows the harshness of slavery and how workers were beaten, frightened, and starved. The story highlights the contrast between these wealthy landowners and penniless immigrants who suffered so much. The book then discusses the economic forces that continue this exploitation: control over prices and lack of worker profitability. Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* is one remarkable representation in his writing of how tenant farmers were exploited during the Great Depression. The novel depicts the cruel living conditions and struggles with subsistence, which Steinbeck embodies in his moving story. Steinbeck portrays banks' impersonal and selfish character, which "breathe profits; they eat the interest on money," as institutions that have nothing to do with compassion (Steinbeck, 2021, p. 23). In the book, a disturbing scene is that



even while people starve, oranges are wrecked deliberately to regulate market prices. The act of kerosene being sprayed over enjoyable fruits while the poor watch in pain symbolises the brutality and cruelties that were partly dished out by economic domination (Steinbeck, 2021). The story also hints at the family's displacement from their land into a life full of poverty and unpredictability. This displacement can metaphorise farmers' loss of their good name and community (Steinbeck, 2021, p.35).

John Steinbeck aptly emphasises the widespread exploitation suffered by the homeless and destitute of that time in the Dust Bowl. The lonely landowners and banks are characterised by their cruelty. For example, it is mentioned that “one could not be an owner unless one were cold” (page 21). This absolute coldness spurs economic oppression, in which the concentrated owners force every action but “repression on the workers” (161). Their incredible physical and emotional strain is made clear through the dehumanising agricultural practices that force them to “crawl like a bug” or ask him to “bend his back” as they are covered in constant labour (157). Wage depression only makes it worse because the starving men fight over low wages, crying out, “I am hungry. I will work for fifteen. I will take food” (193), and thus severely

affected by poverty. Moreover, the manipulation of the agricultural market by cannery owners who “cut the price of fruit below the cost of raising it” represents a deliberate and carefully organised exploitation of small farmers (193-4). Finally, the squandering of food during starvation when “carloads oranges are dumped on the ground” dramatises the cruelty and irrationality that all modes of exploitation manifest (238). These vignettes reveal that Steinbeck not only embodies migrants' suffering and injustice but also blames the system which values profit more than human dignity and survival.

Alienation

Marxists conceptualise alienation as a complex process involving economic structures and human activities. According to Wayne Plasek (1974), the term can be defined as a situation where there is control over man and his development by institutions and social processes of their own making. This concept was further developed by Cao Shu-dong (2009), who looked at alienation as an analytical tool in Marxism. It took shape from a critique of the labour process to include capitalist consumption patterns. Zhang Xiao-chuan (2005) extends the issue to another dimension, stressing that alienation should be considered applicable to the research of

talents, with phenomena of talent representing more intensification. Marx (2007) defines Alienation as the “separation of the labourer from the means of production which, being in the capitalist’s possession, confront the labourer as an alien, enslaving power” (8).

Alienation is one of the themes Steinbeck paints in *The Grapes of Wrath* through the characters’ circumstances, especially those farmers and agricultural workers left economically and socially outsiders by forces at work during that era. The novel represents the characters’ dehumanisation, with a feeling of hopelessness and loss that can be traced to alienation. The farmers and workers are alienated because they have to struggle for sustenance from the land through economic exploitation, which results in poverty and environmental challenges. Thus, they are separated from the benefits of their work while watching how decayed and wasted products depreciate outbuy in, which it is impossible to collect or sell at a reasonable price. This detachment creates a profound sense of powerlessness and disenchantment as they fail to provide their families with food or keep on living the way that once seemed normal. The novel also underscores the characters’ alienation from society at large, where they are on the receiving end of discrimination and exploitation, and that

even goes as far as displacement. Their alienation from society can be deepened only through economic difficulties and social injustice.

Steinbeck captures this deep sense of apartness from work that characterises the workers in the 1930s, reflecting Marxist ideas about alienation. As a result of transforming farming into an industrial process, the owners lost their physical contact with the land; they farmed on paper and forgot what it was to be rooted in the earth (157-158). This alienation includes the labourers who are turned into means of making a profit in a system where even products created through toil by these people are destroyed to maintain market prices, such as oranges dumped so that they should not be taken away from hungry individuals (238). Industrialisation of farming intensifies alienation from work since machinery replaces entire families for the land and turns them into machine-like production units. This loss of connection to the land, the product, and even its production process reflects Marx’s notion of alienation, where workers are separated from their labour and the beliefs that define them as human beings.

These themes are explored in the novel and have generated different scholarly works. Steinbeck’s critique of exploitation is reflected in Aberbach’s



(2021) trove into the environmental disrespect symbolised by the novel. The point that Nez (2022) makes is the redundancy of labour in industrial production, which corresponds to how humanity finds itself under alienation due to accumulation. Instead, Hairunnisa et al. (2021) analyse poverty eradication programs from the novel's lens and examine how such deprivations affect society.

Extracting the theories of famous Marxists, Seeman (1959) developed five categories of alienation: powerlessness, meaninglessness, normlessness, isolation, and self-cultural estrangement. Among these five categories, self-estrangement and isolation can be traced in Echikanam's "Biryani". Seeman argues that self-estrangement is the deprivation of fundamental meaning and pride in work, which is also the cause of failure in one's life. Gopal Yadav is witnessed with a sense of self-estrangement throughout the story. Here, the self-estrangement comes with the incapability to fulfil his family's basic needs through his job. His present job as daily wage labour and his previous one of transporting coal from the mines failed to satisfy Gopal's and his family's basic needs, such as food, clothing, and shelter. During the conversation between Hassainarcha and Ramachandran about the

grand feast at Kalandhan Haji's grandson's reception, Gopal reminisces about his life in his hometown with his pregnant wife, who longed for a meal cooked in 'Basmati' rice. The flashback hits him hard as he cannot fulfil his wife's wishes with his lower income.

Apart from this dissatisfaction, Gopal Yadav encounters a sense of regret and pain from his work, alienating him from the world. His work as a migrant labourer in Kerala for over a decade has made his life meaningless. When Sinan is informed that his hometown is in Jharkhand, Gopal refuses, saying he is a Bihari. Realising the separation of places from Bihar to Jharkhand, Gopal vents his anger by hitting hard against the ground while digging a pit. His anger expresses his disconnection from his hometown because of his work. Healy (2020) defines this condition of work as the objective of a job changing into just a state of physical existence instead of adding meaning to life. He realises his work made him dumb, but he cannot articulate it. Costas and Fleming (2009) argue that this sense of self-estrangement occurs when the labourer becomes the object in exchange for his/her skill, expertise and experience as a commodity product. Gopal Yadav lost himself as the object where his skills and

labour are sold in Kerala in the term 'migrant labour'.

Seeman (1959) brings the term 'isolation' to the concept of alienation in Marxism, where he states that isolation occurs when individuals are forced to underestimate their own highly regarded goals and beliefs. This consequently leads to their isolation from society and changes their priorities in life. In Echiakanam's "Biryani", Gopal Yadav prioritises the eradication of starvation in his family, which pushes him to Kerala as a migrant labourer for fifteen years. To Gopal Yadav, food is the most expensive product in the world, and he is ready to do any work to prevent his family from starving. He recalls the days in his hometown when he worked for long hours on an empty stomach or had just one meal. He is shocked to witness the dumping of barrels of biryani cooked in basmati rice during the reception of Kalandhan Haji's grandson. He is heavy-hearted when ordered to dump the barrels of biryani into the pit he dug with his foot. It hits hard when he cannot provide one meal of basmati biryani to his pregnant wife, whereas the people in the function are wasting tons. Echikanam represents the approach towards food from a capitalist and labourer's perceptions. The story peaks in the climax, revealing the death of Gopal Yadav's daughter Basmati due to hunger.

Here, isolation is faced by Gopal, who views food as a boon, witnessing hundreds of people dying of hunger, and simultaneously seeing people considering food as nothing. Apart from this isolation aspect, after hearing about his pathetic state in his hometown, Gopal Yadav's anticipation of sympathy from Hassanaircha. Instead, he receives the hit of exploitation from Hassanaircha, who yells at Gopal for demanding an increase in wages. This incident made Gopal stop expecting basic humane qualities from a capitalist society towards a labourer.

Coda

Thus, the comparative analysis of Santhosh Echikkanam's "Biryani" and John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* through a Marxist lens reveals deep insights into capitalistic societies. It is evident from both narratives that themes such as alienation, exploitation and also extravagance are well depicted, exposing the socio-economic differences due to capitalism, which tends to dehumanise people. Marxist ideas also permeate both stories by depicting workers' strife and capitalists' hedonism, representing societal injustices and allowing for critical self-reflection. By the Specter of Marx, we mean the spirit of Marxism is prevalent in both works. This paper contributes significantly to understanding Marxist



influence in fiction, demonstrating its importance for contemporary debates on social and economic contrasts.

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