

Original Research Article Unveiling Class Struggle: A Marxist Reading of Filipino Short Stories

ABSTRACT

This paper explored class struggle in Filipino short stories through a Marxist lens, with the goal of uncovering themes related to exploitation, social injustices, and class struggles. Through the use of a directed content analysis approach, we scrutinized five Filipino short stories—*Kalupi* by Benjamin Pascual, *Sandaang Damit* by Fanny Garcia, *Tong* by F. Sionil Jose, *The Money Changer* by Hammed Bolotaolo, and *Ardor* by Alexis A. L. Abola—to comprehend the underlying socioeconomic forces. The study brought light to the pervasive economic disparities and systemic exploitation, shedding light on the challenges faced by marginalized characters as they strive for dignity and identity in the face of adversity. Furthermore, the analysis emphasized how the intersection of class and ethnicity exacerbates social inequalities. In addition to critiquing literary works, this study also encouraged the critical analysis of systemic issues, supporting social change and a more profound comprehension of the social structure in the Philippines.

Keywords: Marxist Theory, Social Injustices, Exploitation, Class Struggle, Filipino Short Stories

1. INTRODUCTION

Filipino short stories serve as potent social mirrors, reflecting the persistent economic struggles and stark class disparities that plague Philippine society. Themes of exploitation and class conflict are frequently woven into these narratives, revealing the power dynamics at play (Reyes et al., 2012). Short stories typically realistically portray life, and through the lens of Marxist theory, with its emphasis on class struggle as the driving force of history, we gain a deeper understanding of these social inequalities.

Birch (1989), in the study of Bashir et al. (2019), mentioned that Marxism views social reality as rooted in historical struggles around class and production systems, which at any given time reflect a dialectical relationship between history and society. Examining Filipino short stories through this lens shows how these power dynamics manifest within the narratives. We witness the challenges different social classes face, from farmers struggling to survive to city workers yearning for better wages. By contextualizing these struggles within the framework of class conflict, we gain a clearer picture of how historical forces have shaped these social structures and how power distribution impacts the characters' lives.

By analyzing class struggle, exploitation, and inequality themes, we gain valuable insights into the historical forces shaping these structures and their impact on individual lives. Ultimately, this analysis transcends literary critique, transforming these stories into powerful tools for social commentary and advocacy. It promotes critical examination of systemic issues and potential avenues for social change, contributing to a deeper understanding of the Philippines' social fabric and the struggles its people face.

2. METHODOLOGY

2.1 RESEARCH QUESTION

This literary analysis aims to analyze valuable insights, themes and narratives on class hierarchy and dynamics of power and oppression through the application of Marxist theory. Specifically, it seeks to answer the question:

1. What are the class struggles, exploitation, and social injustices endured by the characters present in the Filipino short stories?

2.2 THEORETICAL LENS

This content analysis is anchored with Karl Marx's Marxist Theory. According to Bashir et al. (2019), Marxist theory, developed by Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, views social conditions as determined by political and economic factors. Marx and Engels address the social issues arising from the rise of capitalism, analyzing society's instability and constant change. Marxism fundamentally exposes the inconsistencies and injustices inherent in capitalism and critically critiques it.

Marxism posits that societal progress arises from the inherent tension between the wealthy class demanding increased production and the working class fighting for better conditions (Heller, 2018). According to Marxism, social classes are separated into the capital's controlling bourgeoisie and the proletariat, as well as the means of production who do the laboring. Karl Marx's assumptions about social conflict proposed a class conflict involving the proletariat and bourgeois. Lesson struggle catalyzes individuals to acknowledge their loss and estrangement and go forward with a drastic change in circumstances brought about by a revolution (McLellan & Chambers, 2018).

Consequently, this analysis focuses on key characteristics of capitalist societies: class conflicts, labor exploitation, and social injustices. It looks at how these factors produce and maintain economic inequalities and power disparities, emphasizing the effects on people as individuals and as communities. By closely examining these elements, the analysis seeks to expose the fundamental processes that uphold inequality and investigate viable avenues for social transformation and justice.

2.3 METHODS

The study will employ a Directed Content Analysis Approach. According to Delve and Limpaecher (2020), directed content analysis is a deductive technique for qualitative analysis that begins with a pre-existing theory or framework. After that, researchers use data to support or develop this initial theory, offering an organized method for interpreting and analyzing data in relation to preconceived notions. They added that applying current theory or research in this deductive way aids researchers in verifying or disputing evidence related to the phenomenon under investigation. This approach makes it possible to rigorously validate or challenge the theoretical framework by ensuring a methodical analysis of the data.

Hickey and Kipping (1996), as mentioned in the study of Hsieh and Shannon (2005), added that when employing a directed approach, content analysis is guided by a more structured procedure than when using a conventional approach. This approach will begin with coding, utilizing pertinent research findings or theory as guidance (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). Moreover, according to Dehino and San Jose (2020), to produce all the necessary information, the material had to be first arranged and made ready for analysis. Then, the researcher will select which of the various stories is worthwhile to examine in the study. Afterward, the researchers will immerse themselves in the data and allow themes to emerge during the data analysis. It will enable the researcher to strengthen or validate a theory or conceptual framework. In this case, the analysis will be guided by Marxist theory, which examines literature through the lens of inequalities and power disparities.

The Marxist theory will be the basis of the researchers as they analyze 5 Filipino short stories from 21st-century Philippine literature. This approach emphasizes underlying class struggles, exploitation, and social injustices portrayed in the text by revealing the socioeconomic forces at work and their impact on characters, plots, and themes. These key characteristics can be used to discover instances of class consciousness and examine how ideology reinforces social beliefs and mindsets (Bashir et al., 2019) from the five short stories used in this analysis. This is possible since Kashindi (2018) mentioned that Marxism is a sociological approach to literature that views literary or artistic works as products of historical forces, which can be analyzed by examining the material conditions in which they were created.

Significantly, by applying the directed content analysis approach and Marxist theory to these 5 Filipino short stories, we aim to understand better how social classes and inequalities are portrayed in 21st-century Philippine literature.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Class Struggles Among Characters

The first theme concerning class struggles among characters delves into the pervasive **Socioeconomic Inequality** depicted in these stories. They vividly portray economic disparities and the inequitable distribution of opportunities, resources, and privileges within society. For instance, in "Ang Kalupi," the boy represents the marginalized, fighting poverty, and Aling Marta represents the working class struggling to make ends meet. Their interaction reflects the harsh realities of survival and unequal power distribution in a capitalist system, exposing the power imbalances and economic disparities inherent in their social roles. Similarly, "Sandaang Damit" highlights social exclusion and class-based prejudices by eloquently illustrating a poor girl's difficulties in school. This story highlights how imagination can transcend material limitations in a transformative way. Additionally, "Money Changer" depicts Lucio's battles with theft and scams in Manila, highlighting how susceptible Filipinos—especially OFWs—are to exploitation. Lucio, for all his efforts, encounters the difficulties people from poorer socioeconomic backgrounds face when dealing with deceit and exploitation.

The second theme, **Ethnicity and Class**, intricately weaves through these stories, illuminating how discrimination rooted in both aspects compounds the characters' struggles. Take, for example, "Tong," in which class distinctions and societal prejudices Conrado Lopez's love for Chinese woman Alice Tan. They encounter resistance despite their love, especially from Alice's uncle, who is against their union because Conrado is Filipino. Their narrative powerfully illustrates the barriers and prejudice that arise in interethnic relationships in a hierarchical society. Similarly, Through Lucio's experiences, "The Money Changer" emphasizes the intersectionality of class and ethnicity. Being an OFW, Lucio is taken advantage of at a money

exchange, where his Filipino heritage leaves him open to abuse. He is unfairly accused of stealing even though he is a victim of it, bringing attention to the discrimination that people from lower socioeconomic backgrounds—Filipinos in particular—face because of their race and class.

The third theme, **Struggle for Dignity and Identity**, underscores how characters grapple to maintain their sense of self-worth and establish their place amidst adversity, a motif vividly portrayed in these narratives. It is embodied in "Ang Kalupi," where Aling Marta's foolish attempt to raise her family's status by accusing the destitute Andres is falsely highlighted. Marginalized and pursuing dignity, Andres experiences violence and public humiliation, which tragically leads to his death, highlighting the severe effects of societal bias. Similarly, in "Ardor," Ella struggles with her mother's competing demands, balancing her goals and her family's expectations in the face of social injustices and bringing attention to the subtle differences between class and dignity. Ella's interactions with the wealthy reflect her desire for societal advancement and recognition. Moreover, in "Tong," Alice Tan and Conrado Lopez negotiate an identity conflict in the face of social conventions and cultural differences. Conrado's attempt to comprehend Alice's past and her internal struggle to balance her cultural loyalty and personal happiness highlight their more significant search for approval and validation, summarizing the difficulties of cultural integration in a conservative environment.

The fourth and last theme concerning class struggles among characters is **Aspiration and Social Mobility**, which portrays how characters strive to preserve their uniqueness and secure their dignity amid adversity. In "Ang Kalupi," Aling Marta's unshakable dedication to her daughter's education emerges as a ray of hope amidst financial hardships. However, it is soon eclipsed by the harsh reality of theft—a moving illustration of the barriers to upward mobility in an unfair society. Similarly, in "Ardor," Ella's appreciation for people in higher social classes and her desire for a better life echo everyone's desire for acceptance and progress. Her quest for Jayvee reflects people's struggles to rise above their circumstances and forge a better future. Furthermore, "Tong" explores the intricacies of social mobility using Conrado Lopez's quest for love and prestige, underscoring the innate yearning for upward social mobility and the formidable obstacles presented by conventional norms and expectations. Through these stories, the authors offer profound insights into the human spirit by showcasing the courage and persistence of individuals seeking dignity and advancement in the face of deeply ingrained social norms.

Table 1. Lines which characterize Class Struggles Among Characters

RESEARCH QUESTIONS	KALUPI <i>Benjamin Pascual</i>	SANDAANG DAMIT <i>Fanny Garcia</i>	TONG <i>F. Sionil Jose</i>	THE MONEY CHANGER <i>Hammed Bolotaolo</i>	ARDOR <i>Alexis A. L. Abola</i>	THEMATIC ANALYSIS
Class Struggles	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. "However, she doesn't know why the lack of sympathy of the one who asked the question boosted her courage to say, "Well, it's one hundred and ten pesos." 2. "He stood in front of a basket of water spinach, and unfortunately for him, he was haggling." 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. "...let them be, my child, don't mind them. Anyway, when your father earns more money, you'll also be able to bring delicious food, and I'll be able to buy you many clothes." 2. "Old clothes." 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. "...those beautiful things destined to bleakness and from the very beginning, he had an inkling that this was how it would be. And all because Alice Tan was Chinese." 2. "But you can talk with me" 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. "They call their Indonesian or Vietnamese maids 'Filipina,' you know that? Bastard" 2. "...I will also save the girl!' So the thief goes back to the trader's house and, true enough, finds him battering the poor slave-girl." 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. "...and she forgot that she was a small dark girl among fairer children..." 2. "...how much the barangay tanods had been paid to fence off the street and help guests park..." 3. "She studied at the public" 	<p>Socioeconomic Inequality- A prevalent theme across the stories is the portrayal of economic disparity.</p> <p>Ethnic and Class- Discrimination, class and ethnicity interact to make the characters' problems worse</p>

	<p>3. "Its tattered shirt and the long pants, which seemed like the same trousers his father wore."</p> <p>4. "...the dirty garment and the body that seemed to attract dirt..."</p> <p>5. "Because he's unfortunate, uneducated, a dirty wanderer relying on the generosity of others' fortune."</p>	<p>Unappetizing food. Poor"</p> <p>3. "The house they found was dilapidated and worn out with age."</p> <p>4. "...a small, humble abode lacking any luxurious belongings."</p>	<p>anytime as long as there are no customers. My uncle does not mind . . ."</p> <p>He sighed. "That is good to know. But I was not sure. You are Chinese . . ."</p> <p>3. "We are Ongpin Chinese," she said. "Do you know what that means?" He shook his head. "That means we are not rich," she said. "The rich Chinese are in Greenhills."</p> <p>4. "... he did not realize till then the depths of his ignorance about his sister's feelings, but from the expression on her face, he knew at once that Alice Tan – if and when the moment came – would have difficulty living in the same house with her."</p>		<p>school for free..."</p> <p>4. "You need to know how to do what I do, in case things don't work out for you,"</p> <p>5. "It could still amaze her that she lived among them, people whose station in life was far above hers, people who could own houses and keep two or three cars."</p> <p>6. "...his parents were trying to pull strings to keep him from getting kicked out."</p>	<p>Struggle for Dignity and Identity- Characters fight to maintain their individuality and establish their dignity in the face of these hardships.</p> <p>Aspiration and Social Mobility- In the face of these challenges, characters struggle to maintain their individuality and establish their dignity.</p>
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Characters' Experiences of Exploitation

The theme of **Exploitation and Corruption** resonates powerfully throughout the stories, weaving a tapestry of societal injustices and personal struggles. In "Ang Kalupi," the young boy's terrifying journey reveals the harsh realities that the oppressed must contend with—a society in which the powerful freely take advantage of the weak. His unfair treatment by the police and Aling Marta, who put expediency ahead of justice, is indicative of a systemic corruption that seeps into all societal strata. The situation of the young boy is a sobering reminder of how commonplace exploitation is, where those who are weak are left to fight a system that is biased against them.

Similarly, in "Tong," Conrado Lopez's experience reminds us of the sneaky ways that corruption and exploitation creep into regular relationships. Mr. Tan's attempt to influence

Alice's future highlights the willful use of power by those in positions of authority, and his readiness to accept bribes reveals the destructive effect of corruption on moral character. Conrado's fruitless hunt for Alice is reminiscent of the pointless fight against a system in which the disadvantaged are meant to suffer while the privileged few profits. Moreover, "The Money Changer" highlights this theme even more by exposing the complicated web of dishonesty that money changers use to trick unsuspecting people. Lucio's betrayal by the unscrupulous con artists and the apathetic authorities embodies the heartbreaking reality of a society where corruption and exploitation are rampant, and trust is a luxury few can afford. When taken as a whole, these stories present a devastating critique of a structure that upholds injustice and inequality, forcing people to face brutal realities about our society.

Table 2. Lines which characterize Characters' Experiences of Exploitation

RESEARCH QUESTIONS	KALUPI <i>Benjamin Pascual</i>	SANDAANG DAMIT <i>Fanny Garcia</i>	TONG <i>F. Sionil Jose</i>	THE MONEY CHANGER <i>Hammed Bolotaolo</i>	ARDOR <i>Alexis A. L. Abola</i>	THEMATIC ANALYSIS
Exploitation	1. "If anyone is to blame, it's none other than the poor driver. You won't have to answer for the burial expenses either. It will be the driver who will be responsible for that too."		<p>1. "This is where you make your living, where the rich Chinese and your uncle make their money, exploiting the country, its resources, and its people."</p> <p>2. "And then, you are so corrupt. Why, almost every week, someone goes to the shop – policeman, revenue agents, all of them. All they want is money."</p> <p>3. "My father had to pay a bribe of ten thousand pesos – way back in 1950 – for his citizenship. It almost broke him."</p>	<p>1. "Money changers here are thieves, you should know better. Foreigners are not the only victims. They prey on Filipinos too, especially OFWs. Not unusual. And they have lots of tricks. Miscounting, substitution of fake money, and the most common, the sleight-of-hand tricks," he said mechanically while jotting down notes."</p> <p>2. "But you see, Mr. Ocampo, you're still alive." He stopped smiling. "Shall we forget about the rest of your money then?"</p> <p>3. "Lucio thought of something to say, that that was his job, that the people's taxes paid him to do just that. But he knew Magbinay would not let him go."</p>	1. "The Laviñas were obviously wealthy, but the rumor was that they were cheap with the maids."	<p>Exploitation and Corruption-</p> <p>A recurring aspect of all of the stories is corruption and exploitation, in which powerful people take advantage of the less fortunate for their own gain.</p>

Social Injustices Faced by the Characters

The theme of **Economic Inequality and Social Class** permeates deeply through the stories "Ang Kalupi" and "Sandaang Damit," shedding light on the stark divisions between the affluent and the underprivileged. For example, in "Ang Kalupi," Aling Marta's sufferings stand in for the ongoing struggles faced by people with low incomes, and her wish for her daughter's education symbolizes the yearning for upward mobility in the face of economic disparity. Because of the encounter with the accused boy, which highlights the impact of poverty on moral judgment, Aling Marta was driven by desperation to falsely accuse the boy, reflecting societal biases ingrained in class divisions. Similarly, a poor child in "Sandaang Damit" struggles with social acceptance that is correlated with wealth and is made fun of by wealthier peers. Through storytelling, the child's resilience is demonstrated in the face of adversity, resulting in a fictitious world of plenty. However, the fact that these descriptions are only pen and paper highlight the stark contrast between appearance and reality and the significant influence that economic disparity has on societal perceptions. The authors challenge readers to confront systemic injustices by deftly examining the relationship between socioeconomic status, human experiences, and economic inequality through these stories.

The theme of **Power and Corruption** is observable throughout these stories, depicting a pervasive pattern of abuse and exploitation. In "The Money Changer," Lucio's encounter with a dishonest money changer reveals a system of exploitation, which is made worse by Senior Police Officer Magbinay's callous reaction, which assigns blame to Lucio even though he has been victimized. It demonstrates the enormous obstacles that people must overcome in order to pursue justice against corrupt activities, which disproportionately affect weaker populations such as Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs). Similarly, in "Ardor," Sir Obet's commanding reminders to guards highlight the hierarchies within the community and manifest power dynamics. Tales of cruelty from the Laviñas family mirror institutional maltreatment; maids suffer cruelty while the family lives luxuriously, resulting in theft and resignations. The story also highlights the senator's family's powerful influence, as demonstrated by their lavish way of living and the dramatic circumstances surrounding their son's death, culminating in a move to an even larger estate. Together, these incidents highlight the toxic hold of corruption and power over society, compelling thoughts about moral responsibility and societal structures.

The **Struggle for Identity and Belonging** theme resonates deeply in the stories, where characters navigate through cultures that often marginalize them. In the "Tong," the relationship between Conrado Lopez and Alice Tan is a striking example of this struggle. Conrado feels inadequate and cut off from Alice's world. At the same time, Alice struggles with the limitations of tradition and family duties due to their different cultural backgrounds and differing social expectations, which create barriers to their connection. Their love story is a struggle between individual identities and social expectations that end in separation and heartache.

Similarly, "Sandaang Damit" depicts the journey of a poor child facing ridicule and social exclusion due to material differences. Although the child tries to hide their poverty, their strength of character comes through as they create a story of empowerment, represented by a made-up assortment of exquisite clothes. However, realizing that these creations are only imagined highlights the child's deep-seated internal struggle for acceptance and belonging, which resonates with the more significant theme of identity in the face of adversity. These stories effectively convey the struggle for identity and belonging while emphasizing the significant influence of social and cultural barriers on interpersonal relationships and self-perception.

Table 3. Lines which characterize Social Injustices Faced by the Characters

RESEARCH QUESTIONS	KALUPI <i>Benjamin Pascual</i>	SANDAANG DAMIT <i>Fanny Garcia</i>	TONG <i>F. Stonil Jose</i>	THE MONEY CHANGER <i>Hammed Bolotaolo</i>	ARDOR <i>Alexis A. L. Abola</i>	THEMATIC ANALYSIS
<p>Social Injustices</p>	<p>1. "You're the one who stole my wallet, right? Don't deny it!"</p> <p>2. "You're the one who stole my wallet, and no one else. You even pretended to bump into me, huh? Good, your scheme is impressive. You'll indeed profit here at the market!"</p> <p>3. "I'm sure it's him because when he bumped into me, I felt his hand in my pocket."</p>	<p>1. "She became shy because she discovered early on that his situation was different from her classmates."</p> <p>2. "They showed and made it known to her. They were wealthy. They had beautiful and different clothes to wear at school."</p> <p>3. "They often teased her because her clothes, even if they were clean, still looked noticeably old, as they were faded and full of patches."</p> <p>4. "They would attempt to peek at what she brought to eat, and they would laugh when they saw that her packed lunch was just a piece of plain bread, usually without any filling."</p>	<p>1. "What don't you like in us, anyway?" "First," she said, "you are lazy. You don't know what industry is – and this is why, no matter what your leader say, you will never amount to anything."</p> <p>2. "And then, you are so corrupt. Why, almost every week, someone goes to the shop – policeman, revenue agents, all of them. All they want is money."</p> <p>3. "...See?" they never like Chinese girls to date Filipino boys. They think Filipino boys are just making fools of us . . ."</p> <p>4. "My uncle, Conrado. He took care of us when we were orphaned. I told you. And there is this rich Chinese who live in Greenhills. He is a widower."</p>		<p>1. "...they barely got enough to eat, yet the family feasted every night on lechon or roast beef..."</p> <p>2. "...a gun tucked into the waist of his pants..."</p> <p>3. "...unlike Jason who got maids pregnant, who had beat up one of their drivers for picking him up late."</p> <p>4. "The senate had just passed a bill, endorsed by the actor-president, strengthening the state's measures against terrorism but which also made it easier for the police to abuse its power."</p>	<p>Economic Inequality and Social Class- A recurring motif in all stories is the vast disparity between the affluent and the underprivileged.</p> <p>Power and Corruption- There is a constant sense of power abuse and exploitation in these stories.</p> <p>Struggle for Identity and Belonging- In a culture that marginalizes them, the characters in these stories struggle with their identities and feeling of belonging.</p>

			<p>He has helped my uncle. Given my brother very good jobs . . ."</p> <p>5. "Alice walking to the car, her arm held by a fat, bald Chinese, old enough to be her father. "</p> <p>6. "The tong that must be paid, the life that must be warped because it had to be lived."</p>			
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4. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, these stories vividly illuminate the characters' multifaceted challenges, from grappling with class disparities, exploitation, and social injustices to navigating power dynamics and the profound quest for identity and belonging. Through vivid storytelling, the authors illuminate the pervasive socioeconomic disparities, systemic injustices, and cultural biases that shape their experiences. Whether it is Aling Marta's relentless pursuit of dignity in "Ang Kalupi," Ella's delicate balance between personal dreams and familial obligations in "Ardor," Lucio's futile fight against exploitation in "The Money Changer," or Conrado and Alice's poignant journey for acceptance and love in "Tong," these narratives resonate with universal themes of human resilience, perseverance, and the ongoing pursuit of justice and belonging amid life's adversities.

Hence, through these stories, we can gain a deeper understanding of how social classes and inequalities are portrayed as we are compelled to confront uncomfortable truths about societal structures and our collective responsibility to strive for a more just and equitable world where every individual's dignity and identity are respected and valued.

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