

A Marxist Approach on the Portrayal of Class Struggle and Subaltern Identity in Henry Fielding's *Tom Jones*

Md. Al-Amin^{1*}, F.M. Nowruzzaman Nion², and Md. Ashikullah³

^{1, 2, 3}Department of English, Bangladesh Army University of Science and Technology, Saidpur, Bangladesh

emails: ¹*mdalamin@baust.edu.bd; ²nion@baust.edu.bd; and ³ashikullah@baust.edu.bd (* - corresponding author)

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ABSTRACT

This paper tries to explore the representation of class struggles and subaltern identity in the novel *Tom Jones*. Henry Fielding wrote this novel in the 18th century which is widely known for the rise of industrialism. Capitalism emerged in Great Britain at the end of the eighteenth century and a wider gap between the rich and the poor was evident due to the division of labour and capital. Society was significantly influenced by industrialism, and so were the writers and their literary works. It has also influenced contemporary literary works since literature reflects society. The division of different social classes is also shown in literary works. Henry Fielding in *Tom Jones* portrays the real scenario of lower-class people and how upper-class people suppress them. Most of the characters of this novel show their weakness on the issue of social class and wealth. The social and cultural conditions behind this novel as well as Subaltern identity will be discussed from Karl Marx's and Antonio Gramsci's point of view. As regards the methodology, the qualitative method is used in this research. Data has been collected through the content analysis of both primary and secondary sources. Overall, the research work provides an accurate and comprehensive picture of the 18th-century class struggle and Subaltern identity.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Henry Fielding, born in 1707 to a noble family at Glastonbury's Sharpham Park was the fifth son of an earl of Desmond. His father sent him to Leiden to study jurisprudence, and all his biographers agree that he worked hard to master the subject. After some time, he gained the knowledge and skills needed to become a great lawyer. Unexpected events disrupted everyone's plans and future. His father, despite having a well-known family, failed to send him the required funds to pursue his education. Fielding was only twenty years old when he was compelled to leave Leiden and return to London. Henry Fielding's *Tom Jones* is a comic novel to discover the true nature of human beings in contemporary society. By nature, it is a Bildungsroman and a Picaresque novel which was first published on 28 February 1749 in London. The novel deals with the identity of the central character, Tom Jones. Henry Fielding winds up the story in the novel artistically (Thenmozhi & Prabhakaran, 2017).

Henry Fielding has portrayed virtue as an action rather than a thought. Apart from this, there are some other issues to focus on such as the conflict between the upper and the lower class and money-centric attitudes of the characters.

Marxists believe that class conflict is an expression of the dialectical essence of history. As capitalism has grown, the class struggle has become more intense. In the capitalist system, the bourgeoisie, or owners of the means of production, control the system and the workers, or proletariat are subjugated. The domination of the upper class over the lower class is seen in this novel. In this novel, Tom is neglected by higher-class people because of his lower class position. Again, people are showing respect to Mr. Allworthy and Master Blifil because of their upper class position. Class status is the driving force for judging people, and wealth is considered the most valued thing. Some characters show their ultimate greed for money and wealth. They show materialistic attitudes in every aspect of life. By portraying these characters Fielding reveals the bitter reality of the imperial era through a thought-provoking examination of marginalized voices, indirectly subverting the imperial authority of oppression. So, this study aims to portray the class struggle and subaltern identity of the characters of this novel from a Marxist point of view. Additionally, we aim to explore Antonio Gramsci's concept of 'Subaltern' in the characters of *Tom Jones* (Sharma, 2021).

2. METHODOLOGY

This study is a qualitative work based on a close textual analysis of the novel *Tom Jones*, by Henry Fielding. It examines the class struggle and subaltern identity using Marxist theory. Class struggle is one of the basic themes of Marxism. Though this novel was written before the emergence of Marxism, still a Marxist approach to this text can be drawn by giving a special focus on class struggle. Characters of this novel belong to the different classes of society. As a result, some characters are class-conscious, and they neglect lower-class people. This paper will adopt references and different perspectives of earlier works and highlight the portrayal of class struggle. The text itself served as the source of primary data for this study. Secondary data were compiled by examining and evaluating relevant works and literature that contained informative notions and facts related to this topic. It is explored through Marxist theory, addressing how class consciousness impacts interactions among characters. Additionally, Gramsci's concept of the subaltern investigates marginalized perspectives within the novel's social structure. The analytical technique of this paper involves textual and content analysis. This structured methodology enables a deep exploration of the novel's portrayal of social hierarchies and marginalized identities (Zaib, 2015).

3. DISCUSSION AND FINDINGS

Tom Jones is a comic novel written by Henry Fielding. This novel has 18 books, and each book has different numbers of chapters. The first chapter of each book contains a message of the author regarding various topics. This novel was published during the 18th century. During this period, the subject matter of novels shifted from the aristocracy to common people. As a result, the everyday lives of common people became the focus of many novels. Henry Fielding is considered the father of the English novel. He is the first person who started to write novels in an artistic manner where the plots are wisely organized, which leads to a complete story.

Marx and Engels stated that, almost everywhere in the earlier historical periods, society was intricately organized into different orders, with a wide range of social rank gradations. There were patricians, knights, plebeians, and slaves in ancient Rome; in the Middle Ages, feudal lords, vassals, guild-masters, journeymen, apprentices, and serfs; In almost all these classes, there were further subordinate gradations. The modern bourgeois society that has sprouted from the ruins of feudal society has not done away with class antagonisms.

It has established new classes, new conditions of oppression, and new forms of struggle in place of the old ones. Our epoch, the epoch of the bourgeoisie, possesses, however, this distinct feature: it has simplified class antagonisms. Society as a whole is more and more splitting up into two great hostile camps, into two great classes directly facing each other – Bourgeoisie and Proletariat. So, in every period of history a class of people who have special identities belong to the upper class of society and dominate over the lower-class people. The identity of lower-class people is the opposite to that of upper-class people. In the 18th century, upper-class people

had a certain identity. They had a lot of wealth and many servants to look after them. At the same time, the lower-class people had nothing, and they had to work for the upper-class people.

Gramsci examines how subaltern groups, and social classes interact within capitalist structures, focusing on the dynamics between political society and civil society. He establishes subaltern groups as politically and socially marginalized, lacking autonomy or class consciousness. Furthermore, based on Marx and other theorists such as E.P. Thompson and Poulantzas, Gramsci emphasizes class conflict, dialectical linkages, and the incorporation of cultural and ideological components in class analysis (Galastri, 2018).

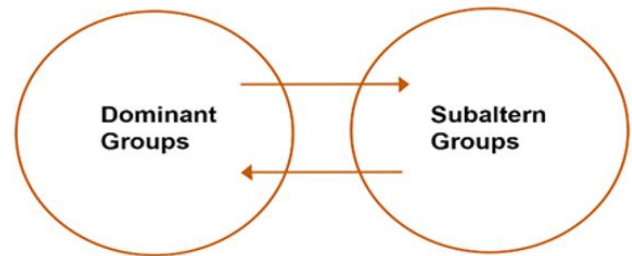


Figure 1: Relationship between Dominant and Subaltern groups (Nilsen, 2020)

Generally, Class struggle generally refers to the ongoing conflict between different social classes, often characterized by economic and political power imbalances. Each class is interdependent but cannot be able to tolerate each other. But there are always some people from both classes who are showing respect to each other. However, there are some variables through which the portrayal of class struggles in this novel can be discussed.

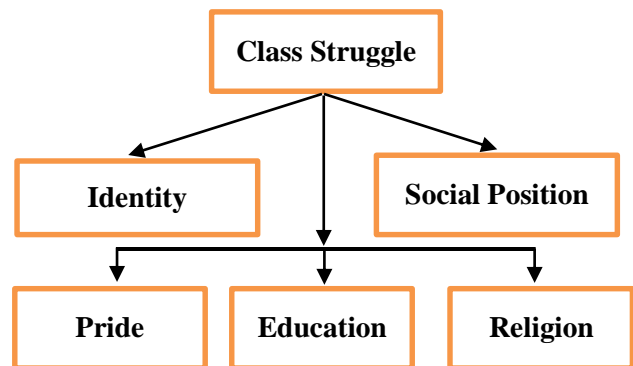


Figure 2: Variables of Class-Struggle

In this novel, identity plays a significant role in terms of class struggle. Identity defines the person, answers who the person is and what the position of the person in society is. This is the general perception about identity. From the beginning of the novel, a concise description of Squire Allworthy is given. Fielding addressed him as a gentleman who inherited one of the largest estates of the country (Fielding, 1749, p. 29). From this description we get to know the identity of Squire Allworthy. He belongs to the upper class of society. His wife died and all of his three children died in their infancy. He has one sister whose name is Miss Bridget Allworthy. Bridget Allworthy also belongs to the higher class of society as she is the only sister of Squire Allworthy. After returning from a

long business trip Allworthy found a little infant in his living room. Allworthy takes responsibility of the kid who is later known as Tom. Allworthy assigned her maid Mrs. Deborah Wilkins to find out the identity of Tom. Mrs. Wilkins suspects Jenny Jones and finally Jenny Jones reveals that she is the mother of Tom Jones. But she refused to reveal the name of the father of Tom. The people of society consider a fatherless child as a bastard, and so, Tom has no official identity. Tom is growing up under the care of Allworthy. But the people of society never accept Tom as a person rather they neglect him for his poor identity. So, from the very beginning society has marginalized Tom and his identity defines his position in society. He belongs to the lower class of society and is neglected by the upper-class people like Squire Western, Master Blifil and so on. As a result, the protagonist of this story can be considered a subaltern. Subalternity is described as a positionality inside historical power relations that is characterized by difficulties in changing these relationships. There are three types of subalterns: irrepressible, hegemonic, and citizen-subalterns (Nilsen, 2020).

Social position is another important factor in the case of class struggle. People who belong to the lower or working class are neglected by the upper-class people. In Henry Fielding's *Tom Jones*, some characters belong to the upper class, some to the middle class, and others to the lower class of society.

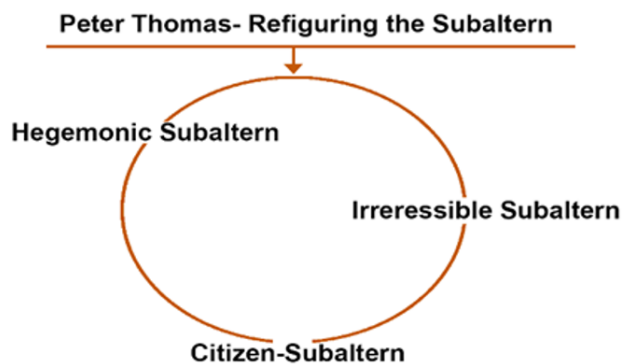


Figure 3: A diagram of a subaltern (Nilsen, 2020)

Fielding incorporates the realities of characters to portray the actual scenario of society. During the 18th-century period novelists shift their writing focus from the elite people to the common people. As a result, the life of common people gets into the central theme of literary writing. In this novel Black George, Molly Seagrim, Partridge, Jenny Jones, later on known as Mrs. Waters, and some other characters belong to the lower class. Squire Allworthy belongs to the ruling class. He holds the material force as well as the intellectual force. He is the decision maker, and everybody is bound to obey him. He owned a large property, and several servants were working for him. Allworthy decided the fate of Jenny Jones after she had admitted the guilt. After Jenny Jones admitted her guilt, Allworthy decided her fate, demonstrating his authority as a dominant intellectual force rooted in his class position and wealth. This reflects a key concept in Marxism, a materialist philosophy that examines how social class and economic power shape society. As Karl Marx claimed: "It is not the consciousness of men that determines their

being, but, on the contrary, their social being that determines their consciousness" (Selden et al., 2017, p. 82).

Partridge is convicted of being the father of Tom Jones and he has to leave his village. Though it was unsure whether he was the real father of Tom Jones, Allworthy decided to cast him away. Partridge gets no opportunity to prove himself innocent and to deny the verdict because of his marginalized voice and class position. Black George, a servant of Allworthy, is also a close friend of Tom's. Allworthy accuses Black George for all the mischief that is done by Tom. Allworthy expels him from his work without considering his economic condition. Henry Fielding shows that class positions except that of the upper class make characters weak and helpless. Here the central characters are subject to authoritative powers. Subalternity refers to marginalized, oppressed, or subordinated groups based on class, caste, gender, or ethnicity. It critiques traditional historiography for neglecting these groups, offering an alternative narrative focused on grassroots resistance and cultural subjugation (Reed, 2013).

Feeling proud of someone's social position and thus neglecting the lower-class people is seen among some characters of this novel. The same feeling is reflected in the character of Mrs. Wilkins. She gets disheartened when Squire Allworthy doesn't distinguish herself from other servants. She wants to make sure to maintain her position above other lower-ranked servants. When she goes to her locality, she boasts of working as a servant in Allworthy's house and neglects her local people. As Fielding describes in the novel, "When the approach of Mrs. Deborah was proclaimed through the street all the inhabitants ran trembling into their houses each matron dreading lest the visit should fall to her lot. She, with stately steps, proudly advances over the field and aloft she bears her towering head, filled with the conceit of her pre-eminence and schemes to affect her intended discovery" (Fielding, 1749, p. 35). Henry Fielding provides a simile to signify this: "As it is the nature of a kite to devour little birds, so it is the nature of such persons as Mrs. Wilkins to insult and tyrannize over little people" (Fielding, 1749, p. 36). Being the servant of Allworthy, Mrs. Wilkins boasts of her social position and thus she neglects "little people". Master Blifil who is the son of Mrs. Bridget, always neglects Tom for his class position. Master Blifil is an educated and gentle boy, yet he has jealousy and pride for his social position. He never considers Tom as his equal.

Education and religion are two dependent variables in the case of class struggle. Education enlightens people. It gives the power to a person to see things differently and widely. Master Blifil is a gentle and educated man, but he cannot accept Tom as his equal. He always considers himself superior to Tom. He represents Tom negatively to Mr. Allworthy. When Mr. Allworthy recovered from illness, Tom celebrated Allworthy's recovery by drinking beer. Master Blifil intentionally tells Mr. Allworthy: "When myself and family were in tears, he (Tom) filled the house with riot and debauchery. He drank and sung and roared, and when I gave him a gentle hint of the indecency of his actions, he fell into a violent passion, swore many oaths, called me rascal and

struck me" (Fielding, 1749, p. 60). Master Blifil deliberately defamed Tom because of his hatred and jealousy toward Tom.

Again, the two tutors show compassion for Master Blifil but they show their anger and hatred toward Tom because of his lower class position. From the religious point of view, Mr. Thwackum always criticizes Tom for his identity and class position. These characters have hollow ideas regarding religion, and they are unable to carry the light of education. Their hearts are filled with hatred and meanness. Through them, Henry Fielding portrays the underside of upper-class people.

To summarize, this paper examines the theoretical and political disparities between "social classes" and "subaltern groups" as postulated by Antonio Gramsci, specifically in Henry Fielding's *Tom Jones* (Galastri, 2018).

4. CONCLUSION

Characters from every social class appear in this novel. Sophia, Square Western, Allworthy, and a few more characters are members of the upper class. Tom, Black George, Molly, the Man of Hill, and a few more characters are members of the lower social class. Henry Fielding consistently attempts to depict how these two classes interact. Fielding likens the upper and lower classes to the human body's right and left hands. Lower-class characters will make up for any shortcomings of upper-class characters. The higher class will provide what the lower-class lacks. For instance, Tom is an honest young man in the book who doesn't crave wealth and money, even though he belongs to the lower class. But being a member of the upper class, Master Blifil is avaricious. One class's limitations will be present in the other class. Henry Fielding attempts to illustrate the limitations of each class as well as their interdependencies. This book was written much longer ago than the present time. However, the characters in this book are comparable to those in our modern society. People like Captain Blifil, who mistreat their family members and marry someone for money, exist in our culture. Captain Blifil is an example of such people. Another similar figure is Master Blifil, who is cruel and envious. However, there are also others who help others when they are in need. People with nothing but a decent heart, like Tom, are also common in today's culture. Nowadays, class consciousness is very prevalent. Humanity, respect for one another, and kindness are being lost in society. We must acknowledge that we cannot live in isolation in society. We sustain one another. People from different social classes rely on each other. Love and respect should be reciprocated. People should be altruistic, kind, and helpful rather than solely focused on money and fortune.

For instance, Fielding also examines how the muted status of female characters contrasts with the power dynamics in a male-dominated society. Sophia and Fanny's voices are mostly silenced, and they are exploited. To live freely, they must wait for those in power to recognize their freedom and choices.

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