

**THE REPRESENTATION OF POWER AND SOCIAL INEQUALITY
IN THE BEGGAR AND THE KING**

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Abstract

This study analyzes the representation of power and social inequality in the play The Beggar and the King by Winthrop Parkhurst. The objective of this research is to examine how power relations are constructed and challenged through the characters, conflicts, and symbolic elements in the play. This study employs a descriptive qualitative method using a Marxist literary approach, focusing on concepts such as class struggle, base and superstructure, and power relations. The primary data were collected through documentation techniques from the script of the play, while secondary data were obtained from relevant books and journal articles related to Marxist literary criticism. The data were analyzed by identifying dialogues, character interactions, conflicts, and symbols associated with social class and inequality. The findings reveal that the King represents the ruling class who possesses authority and control, while the Beggar represents the oppressed class who struggles to fulfil basic needs and gain recognition. The conflict between these two characters reflects the imbalance of power and the gap between social classes. In addition, symbols such as the crown and bread emphasize the contrast between authority and survival. The study also shows that power is not entirely stable because it can be challenged through resistance, even in subtle forms. Therefore, this study demonstrates that literature functions not only as artistic expression, but also as a medium for understanding social structures, inequality, and power relations in society.

Keywords: power relations, social inequality, Marxist literary theory, class struggle, drama

INTRODUCTION

Literature is widely recognized not only as a form of artistic expression, but also as a medium that reflects social realities, including issues of power, inequality, and class relations. Literary works often portray social conditions through characters, dialogue, setting, and conflict, enabling readers to understand how society operates within a particular historical and cultural context. Among various literary genres, drama provides one of the clearest representations of human interaction because conflicts and social tensions are directly presented through performance and dialogue. As a result, drama becomes an effective medium to examine how authority is exercised, how inequality is maintained, and how marginalized individuals respond to dominant power structures. Therefore, literary analysis can contribute to a deeper understanding of social relations and ideological systems within society.

From a theoretical perspective, Marxist literary theory offers an appropriate framework for analyzing social inequality and power relations in literary works. According to Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, society is divided into different social classes whose relationships are shaped by

economic and political power. Marxist literary criticism focuses on concepts such as class struggle, base and superstructure, ideology, and power relations to explain how dominant groups maintain authority over marginalized groups. Terry Eagleton (1976) states that literature often reflects ideological structures and social conflicts existing within society. Through this perspective, literary texts can be interpreted not merely as fictional stories, but also as representations of real social conditions.

Several previous studies have discussed social inequality and class conflict in literary works. Mikael Nilsson (2020) examined economic inequality in working-class literature and found that literary works frequently portray the oppression experienced by lower social classes. Similarly, D. S. S. Panigrahi (2025) analyzed the relationship between Marxism and literary production, emphasizing that literary texts are closely connected to social and economic conditions. In addition, A. Z. Arzaqi and D. L. Al-Furqaan (2025) explored social conflict in literature and concluded that conflict often represents broader tensions between dominant and marginalized groups. Meanwhile, G. Madoyan (2023) highlighted the importance of dialogue and characterization in revealing power relations between characters. These studies indicate that literature can function as a reflection of inequality and social conflict in society.

However, despite the growing discussion of Marxist literary criticism, there is still limited research specifically analyzing the representation of power and social inequality in The Beggar and the King by Winthrop Parkhurst. Most discussions focus only on the dramatic aspects of the play without examining how Marxist concepts are reflected through the characters, conflicts, and symbolism. This gap becomes important because the play strongly portrays the contrast between authority and poverty through the interaction between the King and the Beggar. The King symbolizes authority and control, while the Beggar represents marginalized individuals struggling to survive. In addition, symbolic elements such as the crown and bread reinforce the opposition between political power and basic human needs.

Based on this background, this study aims to analyze how power and social inequality are represented in The Beggar and the King by applying Marxist literary theory. This study focuses on the representation of class struggle, power relations, symbolism, and conflict between the King and the Beggar. The research is expected to contribute to literary studies by providing a deeper understanding of how literature reflects social structures and ideological systems. Furthermore, this study is expected to show that literary works can function as a medium for criticizing inequality and raising awareness about social conditions in society.

METHOD

This study employs a descriptive qualitative method to analyze the representation of power and social inequality in the play The Beggar and the King by Winthrop Parkhurst. A qualitative method is appropriate because the study focuses on interpreting meanings, examining characters, and understanding social issues presented in the text rather than measuring numerical data. The analysis is conducted using a Marxist literary approach, particularly concepts related to class struggle, power relations, ideology, and base and superstructure.

The primary data of this research were collected through documentation techniques from the script of the play. The data include dialogues, character interactions, conflicts, and symbolic elements related to power and social inequality. Secondary data were obtained from books, journal articles, and academic sources discussing Marxist literary criticism, social class, and literary analysis. These references were used to strengthen the theoretical framework and support the interpretation of the findings.

The process of data analysis was conducted in several steps. First, the writer read the script repeatedly to gain a comprehensive understanding of the plot, characters, and conflicts. Second, important data related to class struggle, power relations, and symbolic representation were identified and classified into several thematic categories. Third, the selected data were interpreted using Marxist concepts to explain how inequality and authority are represented in the play. Finally, the findings were connected with relevant theories and previous studies in order to provide a deeper interpretation and strengthen the analysis.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis reveals that The Beggar and the King presents a strong representation of power and social inequality through its characters, dialogue, conflict, and symbolic elements. The relationship between the King and the Beggar reflects the division between the ruling class and the oppressed class, which becomes the central issue in the play. Through their interaction, the play demonstrates how authority is maintained and how marginalized individuals attempt to challenge dominant power structures.

One significant finding is the way dialogue constructs power relations between the two characters. The King frequently responds to the Beggar with rejection, irritation, and superiority. His language reflects authority and dominance, showing that he views the Beggar as socially inferior. This representation supports Marxist theory, which argues that dominant groups often maintain their position by controlling and marginalizing weaker groups. The King's dismissive attitude indicates that authority is not only exercised through political power, but also through communication and social behavior.

In contrast, the Beggar consistently expresses his needs despite being ignored. His persistence represents a subtle form of resistance against authority. Although the Beggar does not possess political or economic power, he continues to demand recognition and basic human rights. This finding reflects the Marxist concept of class struggle, where the oppressed class attempts to challenge the dominant system, even in limited ways. The Beggar's persistence also demonstrates that resistance does not always appear through violence or direct confrontation, but can emerge through continuous demands for recognition and justice.

Another important finding is the representation of basic human needs through the symbol of bread. Bread symbolizes survival, poverty, and material needs, while the crown symbolizes authority, power, and social status. These contrasting symbols strengthen the representation of social inequality in the play. From a Marxist perspective, bread can be associated with the economic base because it represents material conditions and basic necessities. Meanwhile, the crown reflects the superstructure, which functions to maintain social order and authority. The contrast between these symbols indicates that the ruling class prioritizes authority and image rather than addressing the needs of marginalized individuals.

Furthermore, the findings reveal that power in the play is not entirely stable. At the beginning of the story, the King appears confident and fully in control of the situation. However, as the Beggar continues to speak and insist on his needs, the King begins to show discomfort and emotional instability. This reaction suggests that authority can be challenged, even by individuals who do not possess formal power. The Beggar's presence becomes a disruption to the King's control, indicating that power relations are dynamic rather than absolute. This finding supports the argument that dominant power structures contain internal weaknesses and can be questioned through resistance.

The emotional contrast between the characters also strengthens the representation of inequality. The King is portrayed as distant, authoritative, and disconnected from the reality of poverty, while the Beggar is presented as direct, emotional, and focused on survival. This contrast illustrates the social gap between the ruling class and the lower class. The King's inability to understand the Beggar's suffering reflects how privileged groups often become detached from the realities experienced by marginalized people. As a result, the play portrays inequality not only as an economic issue, but also as an emotional and social separation between classes.

In addition, the analysis shows that conflict in the play represents broader social tensions rather than a simple personal disagreement. The conflict between the King and the Beggar symbolizes the tension between authority and marginalized individuals within society. The King attempts to maintain order and protect his status, while the Beggar demands recognition and fulfillment of basic needs. This finding is consistent with previous studies suggesting that literary

conflict often reflects structural tensions between dominant and oppressed groups. Therefore, the play can be interpreted as a critique of systems that prioritize authority while neglecting human welfare.

Language also functions as an important tool of power in the play. The King uses authoritative and dismissive language to reinforce his dominance, while the Beggar uses language to express resistance and demand recognition. This indicates that communication is closely connected to social hierarchy and authority. The King's ability to ignore the Beggar reflects his control over the interaction, whereas the Beggar's persistence challenges that control. Consequently, language becomes a space where power relations are negotiated and contested.

Another important aspect of the findings is the relevance of the play to contemporary social conditions. The inequality represented in the play remains visible in modern society, where individuals with authority often have greater access to resources and influence, while marginalized groups struggle to fulfil basic needs. The relationship between the King and the Beggar reflects real social conditions in which inequality is maintained through both direct control and social neglect. Through this representation, the play demonstrates that literature can function as a reflection of social reality and encourage critical awareness of injustice and inequality.

Overall, the findings indicate that The Beggar and the King is not merely a simple dramatic work, but a representation of broader social issues related to power, inequality, and class division. Through characterization, dialogue, conflict, and symbolism, the play reveals how authority operates and how it can be challenged by marginalized individuals. By applying Marxist literary theory, this study demonstrates that literature can function as a medium to understand social structures, ideological systems, and the persistence of inequality in society.

Power and Class Representation

The findings indicate that the relationship between the King and the Beggar reflects a clear form of class division, which can be effectively interpreted through Marxist literary theory. The King represents the ruling class who possesses authority and control, while the Beggar represents the oppressed class who struggles to fulfill basic needs. This condition reflects the concept of class struggle, where the dominant group maintains power while the lower class attempts to resist, even in limited ways.

The King's behavior, particularly his tendency to dismiss and ignore the Beggar, illustrates how power is maintained through exclusion and control. Such representation aligns with the idea that literature often reflects unequal power relations within society (Panigrahi, 2025). The King's reaction suggests that those in power tend to marginalize voices that threaten their authority, which reinforces the existing social hierarchy. However, the Beggar's persistence in expressing his needs can be interpreted as a form of resistance. Although he lacks formal power, his voice challenges

the dominant structure, supporting the notion that power is not entirely stable and can be questioned by marginalized groups (Nilsson, 2020).

Furthermore, the interaction between the King and the Beggar demonstrates that power is not only exercised through authority, but also through the ability to control whose voice is heard. The King attempts to dominate the interaction by dismissing the Beggar, yet he cannot completely silence him. This suggests that even limited resistance can disrupt dominant power structures. Therefore, the relationship between the two characters reflects a broader social condition in which inequality is continuously reproduced but also potentially challenged.

Base and Superstructure

The findings can also be understood through the Marxist concept of base and superstructure. The Beggar's demand for "bread" represents the economic base, which is related to material conditions and basic human needs. Meanwhile, the King's authority and symbolic elements such as the crown represent the superstructure, which functions to maintain social order and reinforce power.

This contrast indicates that the King prioritizes maintaining authority rather than addressing the economic realities faced by the lower class. According to Marxist theory, the superstructure often serves to justify and preserve the interests of the ruling class (Panigrahi, 2025). In this context, the King's refusal to respond to the Beggar's demand reflects a system where authority becomes disconnected from material needs.

In addition, this imbalance highlights how the superstructure can create a form of ideological control, where the needs of the lower class are minimized or ignored. The King's focus on maintaining power suggests that authority is sustained not only through force, but also through the normalization of inequality. This supports the argument that social systems tend to favor those in power while neglecting marginalized groups (Nilsson, 2020). Therefore, the conflict between the two characters reflects a deeper structural issue, where economic needs are overshadowed by the maintenance of authority.

Symbolism and Social Meaning

The use of symbolism in the play further strengthens the representation of social inequality. The crown symbolizes authority, control, and social status, while bread symbolizes survival and basic human needs. These contrasting symbols make the inequality between the ruling class and the lower class more visible.

Beyond their literal meaning, these symbols also reflect deeper social structures. The crown represents not only political power, but also the ideological system that sustains authority. Meanwhile, bread represents the fundamental needs that are often overlooked in systems that

prioritize power over welfare. This supports the idea that literature can reveal hidden social meanings through symbolic representation (Utami & Suhendi, 2025).

Moreover, the contrast between these symbols emphasizes the gap between abstract authority and concrete human needs. While the crown represents a system of control, bread represents the reality of survival. This opposition highlights how power structures can become disconnected from the basic needs of society. Therefore, symbolism in the play functions as a critical tool to expose inequality and to make abstract social issues more tangible and understandable.

Conflict as Social Representation

The conflict between the King and the Beggar is not merely a personal disagreement, but represents a broader social conflict between different classes. From a Marxist perspective, conflict in literature often reflects structural tensions between dominant and marginalized groups. This is evident in the King's refusal to acknowledge the Beggar's needs, while the Beggar continues to demand recognition.

Previous studies suggest that conflict in literary works often represents deeper social tensions rather than individual problems (Arzaqi & Al-Furqaan, 2025). In this context, the King's behavior reflects a system that prioritizes authority over human needs. Meanwhile, the Beggar's persistence can be interpreted as resistance against this structure.

Furthermore, the nature of the conflict shows that inequality is maintained not only through direct oppression, but also through neglect and indifference. The King does not directly harm the Beggar, yet his refusal to respond creates a form of structural violence. This suggests that power can operate subtly, through inaction rather than direct control. Therefore, the conflict in the play serves as a representation of how inequality is embedded within social systems.

Language and Power Relations

Another significant aspect of the findings is the use of language as a tool of power. The way the King and the Beggar use language reflects their social positions. The King's speech tends to be authoritative and dismissive, which reinforces his dominance. Language, in this case, functions as a mechanism to maintain control and assert power.

In contrast, the Beggar uses language as a form of resistance. Despite his weaker position, he continues to express his needs, indicating that language can also function as a tool to challenge authority. This aligns with the idea that literary dialogue can reveal power relations between characters (Madoyan, 2023).

Additionally, the interaction between the characters shows that communication is not neutral, but shaped by social hierarchy. The King's ability to ignore the Beggar reflects his control over the interaction, while the Beggar's persistence shows an attempt to break this control. This

suggests that language becomes a space where power is negotiated, rather than simply expressed. Therefore, language plays a crucial role in constructing and challenging power relations in the play.

Relevance to Social Reality

The findings also demonstrate that the issues presented in the play remain relevant to real social conditions. Inequality between social classes continues to exist in many societies, where those in power have greater access to resources, while marginalized groups struggle to fulfil basic needs. The interaction between the King and the Beggar reflects this reality, illustrating how authority can ignore or suppress the voices of the oppressed.

This supports the view that literature functions as a reflection of social conditions and can provide insight into real-world issues (Nilsson, 2020). The play shows that power is not always absolute, and it can be challenged through resistance, even in subtle forms.

Furthermore, the relevance of the play lies in its ability to represent inequality in a simple yet meaningful way. By focusing on two contrasting characters, the play highlights complex social issues in an accessible form. This indicates that literature can play an important role in raising awareness about inequality and encouraging critical reflection on social structures. Therefore, the analysis confirms that literary works can serve as a valuable medium to understand and critique power relations in society.

CONCLUSION

This study aims to analyze the representation of power and social inequality in The Beggar and the King by applying Marxist literary theory. Based on the findings and discussion, it can be concluded that the play clearly represents class division through the relationship between the King and the Beggar. The King symbolizes the ruling class who possesses authority and control, while the Beggar represents the oppressed class who struggles to fulfil basic needs and gain recognition within society.

The analysis demonstrates that power in the play is constructed through dialogue, behavior, conflict, and symbolic elements. The King maintains his authority by dismissing and ignoring the Beggar, which reflects the unequal relationship between dominant and marginalized groups. Meanwhile, the Beggar's persistence functions as a form of resistance that challenges the stability of authority. This finding indicates that power is not entirely absolute because it can be questioned, even by individuals who do not possess formal social or political power.

Furthermore, the symbols of the crown and bread strengthen the representation of inequality in the play. The crown symbolizes authority, social status, and ideological control,

whereas bread symbolizes survival and material needs. Through these symbols, the play reflects the contrast between those who hold power and those who struggle to survive. The study also shows that social inequality is maintained not only through direct domination, but also through neglect and the inability of the ruling class to understand the realities experienced by marginalized individuals.

By applying Marxist concepts such as class struggle, base and superstructure, and power relations, this study confirms that literature can function as a reflection of social structures and ideological systems. The conflict between the King and the Beggar represents broader social tensions that continue to exist in real society, particularly the imbalance between authority and human welfare. Therefore, the play not only serves as dramatic entertainment, but also as a social critique of inequality and power imbalance.

This study contributes to literary criticism by providing a deeper understanding of how Marxist literary theory can be applied to analyze drama and social representation. However, this study is limited to the analysis of a single play and focuses primarily on Marxist theory. Future researchers are encouraged to examine similar issues using different theoretical perspectives or compare multiple literary works to obtain broader insights into the representation of social inequality in literature.

Overall, this study demonstrates that literature is not merely a form of artistic expression, but also an important medium for understanding, criticizing, and reflecting upon social realities related to power and inequality.

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