
The Comparative Analysis of Social Inequality and Alienation in *A Short Happy Life of Conat* and *The Garden Party* Using Marxism

**Risca Jovita Odelia¹, Stefanie Keren Bunadi², Rafael Aglis Ariya
Tamtama³, Dian Widya Kriswanto⁴, Anna Sriastuti⁵**

risca.odelia@gmail.com¹, stefaniekeren@gmail.com², rafaelaglis123@gmail.com³,
dianwidya246@gmail.com⁴, anna.sriastuti@uksw.edu⁵

Universitas Kristen Satya Wacana

Abstract

This analysis juxtaposes Mochtar Lubis's *The Short Happy Life of Conat* with Katherine Mansfield's *The Garden Party* to explore themes of inequality, class distinction, and alienation. Employing Marxist theory, the study examines how Conat, a trishaw driver, experiences alienation from the products of his labor and the labor process itself, echoing Marx's critique of capitalism. In contrast, Laura from "The Garden Party" confronts a different form of alienation, where familial capitalist values overshadow human connection. Despite their disparate socio-economic backgrounds, both characters serve as poignant examples of alienation within their respective societies, illustrating its pervasive impact.

Keywords: *alienation, exploitation, Karx Marx, Marxist theory, social inequality*

Introduction

In *The Short Happy Life of Conat* the main character, Conat, is a trishaw driver who embodies Marx's theories of alienation from the product of labor and the activity of labor. Despite his relentless work ethic, Conat's efforts yield insufficient rewards, highlighting his disconnection from the value generated by his labor. The monotonous and physically demanding nature of his job further exacerbates his sense of alienation, as he lacks control and fulfillment in his work. Conversely, *The Garden Party* by Katherine Mansfield delves into a different dimension of alienation, one that is more psychological and emotional. Laura, the story's protagonist, finds herself in conflict with her family's insensitivity towards a tragic event - a man's death near their home. Her family's prioritization of their garden party over the tragedy underscores a form of alienation from human empathy and moral values, illustrating how capitalist values can distort personal relationships and self-perception.

The analysis of these two stories is using Marxist theory which in general, Marxism talks about social, political, and economic philosophy. Marxist perspective highlights the themes of social inequality and the exploitation of the lower class (the Proletariat) by the upper class (the Bourgeoisie) (Marx & Engels, 1969). This analysis will discuss how the main characters of two stories analyzed using the theory of Marxist differ from their social class.

Alienation is a recurring theme in literature, often reflecting broader socio-economic and philosophical concerns. The theme of alienation has been persistently and unflinchingly addressed in modern literature (Saleem, 2014). Alienation occurs when a person withdraws or becomes isolated from their environment or from other people. Those who exhibit symptoms of alienation often reject loved ones or society (Sarfranz, 1997). They may also experience feelings of distance and estrangement, even from their own emotions. According

to Karl Marx, alienation is the separation from the products of one's labor and from one's very essence as a human being.

Some studies are found regarding inequality and alienation. Alfarini and Tetty (2022) employ textual analysis to investigate gender inequality in Cho Nam Joo's novel *Kim Ji Young, Born 1982*, translated by Jamie Chang. Drawing on Sylvia Walby's comprehensive theory of gender inequality (1990), which encompasses domains such as household production, paid work, the patriarchal state, male violence, sexuality, and culture, their research identifies and analyzes these manifestations within the novel. The main character's journey reflects profound experiences of depression and personal transformation in response to these inequalities. In a similar vein, Najah, Hidayati, and Wardana's (2023) study examines how the protagonist navigates marginalization, subordination, stereotypes, and violence using theoretical frameworks including formalism theory by Boris Tomashevsky, Simone de Beauvoir's existentialist feminism, and Mansour Fakih's gender inequality theory.

Finally, this study delves into the concept of alienation as portrayed in two distinct short stories: Mochtar Lubis's *The Short Happy Life of Conat* and Katherine Mansfield's *The Garden Party*. Despite their distinct cultural and social contexts, both narratives offer profound insights into how individuals can experience alienation from their work, the products they produce, and even their own sense of identity within specific economic systems. The research also examines how the protagonists in these stories strive for liberation, illustrating women's agency across professional, intellectual, and societal domains. By comparing these narratives, this paper aims to underscore the multifaceted dimensions of alienation as theorized by Karl Marx, emphasizing its economic implications and its profound impacts on interpersonal relationships and self-perception. This comparative approach deepens our understanding of how alienation manifests across diverse contexts, revealing its pervasive influence on individuals within capitalist societies.

Method

The approach used in this study is a qualitative approach used to find equations between the two short stories *The Short Happy Life of Conat* and *The Garden Party*. According to (Sugiyono 2015) mentions that the qualitative research methods are used by researchers in natural object conditions. According to Creswell (2016) qualitative research is "a type of research that explores and understands meaning in a number of individuals or groups of people who come from social or humanitarian problems".

Based on the above understanding, it can be seen that qualitative research is natural research and the resulting data is descriptive. That is natural and the data produced is descriptive. In this study using a qualitative approach with the type of research content analysis. This research focuses on how the main characters experience different levels of alienation as a result of their economic situation. The data can be obtained from close reading and other researches from the article.

The two short stories were closely read with the objective to identify dialogue and passages that dealt with alienation-related themes. This meant looking at the interactions between the characters, their inner monologues, and the socioeconomic environments that the stories portrayed. Following the passages were identified, they were coded based on themes discovered in Karl Marx's theory of alienation. The classification categories applied were specifically alienation from the self, alienation from the activity of labor, and alienation from the product of labor.

To bring focus on similarities and differences in the ways that alienation appears in the main characters of the two stories, the coded data was compared. Understanding the broader implications of alienation across different socioeconomic and cultural contexts was made more straightforward by this comparative approach. This analysis was conducted using Karl Marx's theory of alienation as the interpretive framework. The study was aimed at explaining how the characters' experiences of alienation are impacted by their social and economic contexts by applying Marxist ideas.

In addition, the focus on Marxist theory could cover up alternative theoretical stances that are equally relevant to the study of alienation in literary works. Applying a qualitative methodology, this research offers an in-depth understanding of the representation of alienation in *The Short Happy Life of Conat* and *The Garden Party*, exposing the socio-economic and psychological elements of this theme.

Findings and Discussion

In this analysis, the researchers highlight the discussion on social inequality and exploitation and the alienation of the analysis main characters from *The Short Happy Life of Conat* and *The Garden Party*.

Social Inequality

Inequality can be understood in various ways depending on different contexts and perspectives. It encompasses distinct yet overlapping economic, social, and spatial dimensions (Koh, 2020). In *The Short Happy Life of Conat* and *The Garden Party*, social inequality is illustrated through the main characters, Conat from the lower class and Laura from the upper class. Exploitation, defined as the manipulation or abuse of power and control over someone, is evident in these stories. Conat's interaction with the Cabinet Minister highlights this exploitation, suggesting that Conat was deemed undeserving of a blood transfusion compared to the Cabinet Minister. Meanwhile, Laura's life and interactions in *The Garden Party* underscore the stark economic disparities between her and the other characters.

"Conat, a low-ranking government messenger, earned only 325 rupiah a month."
(Page 1 1st Paragraph)

"His wages were not even enough to buy food with. Twenty rupiah a night allowed them to live decently in poverty." (Page 1 - 4th Paragraph).

"Conat was lucky. An employee of the Blood Bank was willing to donate on Conat's behalf. They took the blood quickly to the hospital and a nurse took it straight away to the patient."

"Neither Conat nor Tinah heard the angry conversation between the employee of the Blood Bank and the doctor. The blood he had given had been used for a major dignitary, involved in an accident about the same as Conat."

The first quote establishes Conat's position in the lower class and the meagerness of his wages, highlighting his struggle to survive and the exploitation inherent in his social status. Conat's experience is further contrasted with that of the Cabinet Minister, who, despite being involved in a similar accident, receives preferential treatment. The statement, *"Conat, a low-ranking government messenger, earned only 325 rupiah a month"* and *"His wages were not even enough to buy food with. Twenty rupiah a night allowed them to live*

decently in poverty” underline the harsh economic realities faced by Conat, whose meager earnings barely sustain his basic needs. The stark disparity in how the Cabinet Minister and Conat are treated reveals the systemic exploitation of the lower class, as the Cabinet Minister’s status ensures he receives immediate and high-quality medical attention, whereas Conat is left dependent on the charity of others, “*Neither Conat nor Tinah heard the angry conversation between the employee of the Blood Bank and the doctor. The blood he had given had been used for a major dignitary, involved in an accident about the same as Conat.*” This incident starkly illustrates the preferential treatment afforded to the upper class, highlighting the deep-seated inequalities within the societal structure.

In *The Garden Party*, class distinction is also evident through Laura's life and her interactions with the workmen, as well as the comparison between her home and Mr. Scott's. Laura's fleeting awareness of the absurdity of class distinctions is captured in her internal monologue, “*It's all the fault,*” she decided, *as the tall fellow drew something on the back of an envelope, something that was to be looped up or left to hang, of these absurd class distinctions.*”

Laura's family's affluence is symbolized by the presence of a tennis court, a luxury item that implicitly showcases their economic status, “*A corner of the tennis-court,*” she suggested. “*But the band's going to be in one corner.*”

In stark contrast, Mr. Scott's home is depicted as a place of poverty and hardship, “*She found herself in a wretched little low kitchen, lit by a smoky lamp. There was a woman sitting before the fire.*” This vivid description highlights the stark differences in living conditions between Laura's family and Mr. Scott's, further emphasizing the theme of social inequality.

The distinction between Laura and the workmen is not just economic but also social and emotional. Laura's brief interaction with the workmen momentarily bridges the gap between the classes, but her return to the comforts of her home reinforces the entrenched class divisions. The luxurious setting of Laura's home, complete with a tennis court, stands in stark contrast to the impoverished conditions of Mr. Scott's home, underscoring the vast economic disparity.

Furthermore, Laura's initial empathy towards Mr. Scott's family is overshadowed by her family's insistence on proceeding with the garden party, reflecting how capitalist values can diminish human empathy and prioritize social status over genuine human concern. Laura's struggle with her conscience highlights the emotional and moral distance that wealth can create, making her complicit in the perpetuation of these class distinctions. Both stories thus explore the multifaceted nature of inequality and exploitation within capitalist societies. Conat's experience illustrates the economic exploitation of the working class, where his labor and very existence are undervalued. His alienation is both economic and existential, as he is estranged from the fruits of his labor and from a society that views him as expendable.

In contrast, Laura's story in *The Garden Party* emphasizes the social and emotional dimensions of inequality. Her brief encounter with the reality of Mr. Scott's life and death offers a glimpse into the harsh realities faced by the working class, but her return to the privileges of her upper-class life underscores the persistent divide. Laura's existential alienation arises from her family's detachment from genuine human values and empathy, revealing the moral cost of maintaining social hierarchies. Both *The Short Happy Life of Conat* and *The Garden Party* provide profound insights into the pervasive impact of social inequality and exploitation in capitalist societies. Through their narratives, these stories critique the structures that perpetuate economic and social disparities, illustrating how such inequalities alienate individuals from their labor, their communities, and their own humanity. The exploration of these themes highlights the need for a more equitable society that values human connections and dignity over economic status and privilege.

Alienation

According to Karl Marx, alienation is separation from the products of one's labor, and separation from one's very essence as a human being. Karl Marx explained alienation into 4 concepts: (1) the product of labor, (2) the process of labor, (3) Others, and (4) self. Alienation from the product of labor is in a capitalist system, workers do not own the products they create. They are alienated from these products, which are sold for profit, a profit they do not enjoy. *“Thus, the final product does not feel like the worker’s own and is creatively unrewarding. The product becomes an alien object, one that the worker produces only for the means of wages and survival”* (Olivia 2024). Alienation from the process of labor is that the Workers do not have control over the labor process and the work is often monotonous and does not fulfill the worker’s creative potential. *“They also must complete the tasks set by their employer, meaning that the process of labor is something external to the worker”* (Olivia 2024). Alienation from others is that the workers compete with each other in a capitalist system, leading to a sense of isolation and a lack of community. *“Under capitalism, workers are encouraged to compete against each other for jobs, better products, and higher profits. This pits individuals against each other in a competition to sell their labor for the lowest possible value”* (Olivia, 2024). The last is Alienation from self. This refers to the idea that work in a capitalist system is external to the worker’s identity. Instead of being a natural expression of the worker’s abilities and aspirations, work is a means to survive. *“Work under capitalism alienated individuals from themselves since work is no longer a joy, but simply a means to earn wages to survive”* (Olivia 2024).

Based on those 4 concepts of alienation, "Conat", the main character in the short story *The Short Happy Life of Conat* is in accordance with these two of the four concepts. The concept of “alienation from the product of labor” can be understood from his services provided and the income. *“Conat drove a trishaw, as he explained to Tinah, so they could live honestly. His wages were not even enough to buy food with. Twenty rupiah a night allowed them to live decently in poverty.”* (p.1)

Conat, as a trishaw driver, experiences alienation from the product of his labor. Despite working diligently day and night, his wages are meager and insufficient to provide a decent standard of living for his family. This alienation is evident in his constant struggle to make ends meet and his inability to fully enjoy the fruits of his labor. Conat has a product, namely transportation services that it offers to his passengers. Every ride he provides is a direct result of his hard work. His Income: The money Conat earns from driving a trishaw can also be considered the result of his hard work. However, the small salary he received did not reflect the true value of his hard work, leading to alienation. While the concept "alienation from the activity of labor" we can see that Conat's experience as a trishaw driver also reflects this concept where doing this work is repetitive and tiring, but his agency and control over the production process is limited. The monotony and lack of satisfaction in his work contributed to a sense of alienation, where he felt disconnected from the creative and meaningful aspects of work. Therefore, it can be concluded that Conat experienced alienation from its products and production processes. *“He had worked day and night for three years. He was thin. His legs bulged with muscles. His eyes were red and hollow from lack of sleep.”* (p.1). Conat's experience as a trishaw driver also reflects alienation from the activity of labor. He engages in repetitive and laborious work, yet his agency and control over the production process are limited. The monotony and lack of fulfillment in his work contribute to a sense of alienation, where he feels disconnected from the creative and meaningful aspects of labor.

Based on those four concepts of alienation, “Laura”, the main character in the short story “The Garden Party” is in accordance with one of these four concepts. The concept of

“alienation from the self” can be understood from her concern and questioned the feasibility of continuing with the party.

“Stop the garden-party, of course.” Why did Jose pretend? (p.8)

“But Jose was still more amazed. “Stop the garden-party? My dear Laura, don’t be so absurd. Of course we can’t do anything of the kind. Nobody expects us to. Don’t be so extravagant.” (p.8)

“But we can’t possibly have a garden-party with a man dead just outside the front gate. (p.8)

This dialogue highlights how Laura's family dismisses a tragic event (the man's death) in favor of continuing with the party, reflecting a devaluation of human life and empathy. The story hints at the devaluation of human life and labor under capitalism. When Laura learns about a man's death nearby, she initially expresses concern and questions the appropriateness of continuing with the party. However, her family dismisses these concerns, emphasizing the importance of the party over the tragic event. This attitude reflects how capitalism can alienate Laura from empathy and devalue human life and prioritize economic activities over human empathy and connection.

Conclusion

Based on the analysis, both stories highlight social class distinctions and the theme of alienation in capitalist societies. Conat's story reveals the harsh realities of the proletariat, focusing on poverty and bourgeois exploitation by a Cabinet Minister. *The Garden Party* critiques social inequality by contrasting the workmen's experiences with those of the wealthy Sheridan family, particularly Laura. The analysis shows that Laura fails to sympathize with Mr. Scott's family, while Conat, from a lower social stratum, does not receive justice. Both stories depict how capitalist societies foster alienation. In *The Short Happy Life of Conat*, Conat feels estranged from his labor due to low wages and repetitive work, reflecting Marx's concept of alienation. *The Garden Party* demonstrates how capitalism diminishes empathy and human life, as seen in the Sheridan family's reaction to a working-class neighbor's death. Laura's family's emotional distance and devaluation of human life exemplify this alienation, while Conat's alienation is tied to his work and its outcomes. In conclusion, both stories illuminate the broader issue of alienation in capitalist societies.

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