

**Daniel Defoe's A Journal of the Plague Year: A Marxist analysis****Mahnoor Rasheed<sup>1</sup>, Ambreen Salahuddin<sup>2</sup>****Abstract**

This research looks at Daniel Defoe's *A Journal of the Plague Year* through lens of Marxist theory. Class distinction and exploitation are significant concerns of Marxist thought. Defoe delineated the devastating situation of Londoners in 1664. This research highlights the other side of the picture and sheds light on the exploitation of the marginalized and poor class of London. During 1664 a great plague struck London, but class exploitation and capitalism proved more destructive for the lower class of London than the plague. During the year 1664 London was in the firm grip of imperialism and capitalism. Through the lens of Marxism, this research investigates the struggle between the two classes of London during 1664. The analysis technique of textual analysis is used in this qualitative work.

**Keywords:** Daniel Defoe, Marxist theory, exploitation, imperialism, capitalism

**1. Introduction**

Daniel Defoe got fame for the novel Robinson Crusoe. After that, he penned *Moll Flanders*, *Colonel Jack*, *Captain Singleton*, *A Journal of the Plague Year*, and *Roxana*. Daniel Defoe delineated the themes of poor suffrage, political crisis, social stigmatization, and class discrimination, and his novels demonstrated the cruel historical aspects. Defoe's primary concern remained confined to social mobility in his novels. Afrelia writes, "Defoe exactly is affected by his own life in society. It means that some of Defoe's life experience sets up in his writing. Defoe here wants to reveal the condition of imperialism by entering social mobility issue. Defoe rises up the bourgeoisie ideology in his own life and affects to his literary work" (2016, p.14). Bourgeoisie ideology revolves around the capitalist system in society. Defoe illustrated the difference between the poor and affluent classes in his literary work. *A Journal of the Plague Year* memoir revolves around suffering, social dilemma, and devastation (Knowles, Ruth & Hindly, 2019). *A Journal of the Plague Year* is the amalgamation of the genre of history, fiction, autobiography and allegory, and readers discover genre's multiplicity in Defoe's text (Connor, 2020).

Defoe delineated the poor and drastic circumstances of poor people during the plague. Journal's protagonist H.F. was the first-person narrator who described the situation of poor people. Defoe's journal is based on his personal experience and is a semi-autobiographical memoir (Grass, 2021). *A Journal of the Plague Year* is a reality-based work as it talks of an actual historical plague (Hannis, 2007; Fissell et al., 2020). Defoe set forth the true reality of the proletariat class of Londoners. The poor class got affected due to disease and they were doubly marginalized as they were colonized as well. Defoe was young during the plague year and he quoted various quotes from his uncle's Memoriam Bills of Mortality. Connor states, "Perhaps Defoe had access to a lost memorial written by his uncle, but to all intents and purposes the journal is his own work" (2020, p. 505). Defoe focused on the themes of status quo and class distinction. During 1664, the poor class was under suppression due to the bourgeoisie class, and later on, the plague captivated them. The protagonist decided to stay in the city and observed various pathetic incidents. Rich people were leaving the city and on the other hand poor people were restricted in the city and there was not any option left for them.

Poor class became the victim at the hands of quacks, doctors and astrologers, and the authorities exploited them for their means. The higher authorities exploited the poor class and locked the infected people. Defoe described how the aristocratic class was free and enjoyed their life as before. This research analyses these concerns, i.e., devastation of Londoners and proletariat class people, through the lens of Marxism.

Exploitation and false consciousness are the foundation of the capitalist class that destroy the peace of society (Masood & Shafi, 2020). Defoe, in his journal, delineated the pathetic condition of the working class. Moseley wrote, "The profit of capitalists is the result of the exploitation of workers because the value produced by workers is greater than the wages they are paid" (2011, p. 2). The aristocratic class paved the road for the harsh capitalism faced by the proletariat class. Parker wrote, "For Marx, human history begins with the desire for food and shelter" (Parker, 2019). According to Marxism, society is based on the struggle of the Proletariat and Bourgeoisie classes. Due to an unequal distribution of wealth, the working class becomes the victim of exploitation by the Bourgeoisie class (Masood & Shafi, 2020). The proletariat class's life revolved around bread and butter. It leaves them under suppression. Throughout history, the world has remained under the control of the capitalist system. Daniel Defoe's journal brings forth solid evidence of capitalism during the mid of the seventeen centuries. The dominant groups prohibit the minority and inferior groups from raising their voices because they consider it a threat against their superiority.

This research aims to examine the degree of the suppression of the inferior and labor class as portrayed in *A Journal of the Plague Year* through the lens of Marxism critique class conflict. This theory analyses the portrayal of marginalization of the lower class of London at the hands of the upper class, as depicted in this journal. This

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research is relevant to the contemporary era because third world countries are still under the firm grip of imperialism. The objective of this work is to investigate the existence and representation of economic marginalization and capitalist exploitation in *A Journal of the Plague Year* through lens of Marxist thought.

## 2. Review of Literature

Modern London's economic foundation was on capitalism. Marxist theory elucidates the desolate and darkened side of the proletariat class, as wealth revolves around society's aristocratic and elite structure. In contrast, the working class remained under deprivation in the communist system. All the social institutions, for instance, law and justice, are controlled by the rich. Class discrimination is a significant reason for social marginalization and imperialism (Masood & Shafi, 2020). Similarly, the life of modern Londoners was under challenging circumstances due to capitalism. A large number of working and the poor class was under continuous impoverishment. Parker wrote, "For Marx, this process culminated in his own time, at the height of the industrial revolution and the growth of factories, with a small number of owners and a large number of workers" (2019, para,12).

Various critics approached Defoe's critical work through different approaches; for instance, Peter Brimblecombe (2020) analysed the similarities between Defoe's novel and the present situation of COVID-19. The bubonic plague was spreading in 1664 and in the novel, the infection is brought from foreign countries. Similarly, in the contemporary age, the plague i.e., COVID-19 started from China. Brimblecombe compares the two situations and examines Defoe's role as a futurist in his novel. He analysed the situation of London in 1664 and the present era suffering due to Covid-19. The economic condition was significantly affected due to infection in this century as well as the lockdown destroyed everything. The plague confined the people to their homes, and they could not earn money. He excellently defined Defoe as a futurist who elaborated clearly in his journal about the future disease.

Martin Wagner (2017) analysed the journal according to Foucault's concept of power. Wagner claimed that during the plague year in London, the situation was under the control of the government. However, Londoners faced various calamities due to the lack of facilities and necessities.

Falkenhayner (2019) examines this text under the lens of Lotman's cultural semiotic approach. In his article, he analyzed London's anarchy, and there was no organization in this region. Fake news was spreading in this region. People were fleeing. Society was on the edge of catastrophe and disorientation. He analyzed the society in which the laborers were suffering. They were in continuous disaster due to disease and the country's economic condition was quite unstable. The higher authorities enforced physical and discursive restrictions on Londoners. Knowles, William Ruth, and Hindly (2019) focused on the issues of the organization by the government sectors during the plague. They needed to be more effective in handling and dealing with the situation. But the government was not doing so with proper planning.

Stemphanson (1983) addressed the central theme of this journal with a different aspect. He investigated that Defoe used different images in his journal. Primarily Defoe employed biblical imagery in his journal. He elaborated on various points where God sent this plague for Londoners. It was the castigation of God for Londoners due to their sins. Critics here claimed that Defoe employed dreadful imagery in his work. Like God has sent it for the people of London. They were facing this catastrophe due to their corrupt behaviour. Defoe has employed biblical imagery in this text. Boluk and Lenz (2010) explored the country's economic conditions and created a close relationship between plague and zombies with capitalism. In their research, they compared the two pieces of fiction, Ben Jonson's *The Alchemist* and *A Journal of the Plague Year*. Zombies and the plague both have a significant influence on economic issues. Both novels revolve around London's situation due to these infections. In this text, the infection has a relation with capitalism. They claimed that industrial capitalism greatly influences the world's economic condition. According to Defoe's text, the plague and capitalism could increase the anxiety of the global world and the critics claimed that plague and capitalism could destroy the whole community.

The researchers have investigated Defoe's text from various perspectives. Apart from the discussed research, the other angles through which this work has been explored include representation and management of crisis (Knowles, Ruth & Hindly, 2019), life and death instincts (Oguz, 2019) and so on. However, the text has not been analysed through a Marxist lens. This research will fill this gap and elucidate the different factors responsible for the suppression and subordination of the working class in London. This research aims to unearth the factors responsible for the subordination and suppression of the working class as shown through Defoe's work. The previous researchers did not approach this text from the Marxist perspective. This research is distinguished from previous research because this research will employ Marxist theory with textual analysis, that will ultimately strengthen the research.

## 3. Marxist Theory as theoretical lens

Karl Marx claimed that institutionalized systems segregate people into different groups. The dominant groups control the subdominant groups. Karl Marx said, capitalism came into the world "dripping from head to toe from every pore with blood and dirt" (Bowens et al., 2013, p. 5). Karl Marx wrote The Communist Manifesto which

presents a social, political, and economic theory. The theory focuses on the struggle between capitalists and the working class. During the 1960s and 1970s, the world was dominated by the capitalist system, and the capitalist system was the big hurdle in the way of development of third-world countries. Because the country of the centre was controlling the countries of the periphery (Brewer, 2001). Furthermore, this ideology believed that the conflict between the upper and lower class would ultimately lead to a revolution. Marx claimed that the dominant social group exploits the minority groups. Especially the owner of the factories exploits and utilizes the working class. In a class society, wealth and resources are under the control of only a few people, and the majority of people are exploited for their labour (Bowens, 2013). Masood and Shafi wrote, “Karl Marx, in opposition to these inhumane acts, presented the idea of equal distribution of wealth in the society that can make the society a paradise on earth.” (2020, p.19). Marx also gave the concept of the Bourgeoisie and Proletariat class. Marx claimed that society is divided between base and superstructure. “The new class of capitalist merchant, the bourgeoisie, exploited the class of workers, the proletariat” (Parker, Key Concepts in Marxism, 2019, para.1). In *A Journal of the Plague Year*, there is a lack of class consciousness because the working class could not realize that the upper class was continually exploiting them. Instead, the working and poor class was mute and was unable to recognize the facts that the feudal lords were exploiting them for their means. Londoners were unaware of their exploitation because Defoe wrote this journal before the birth of Karl Marx.

During the plague year, the working class got affected due to economic crisis and unemployment. The aristocratic people of London remained safe from the severe circumstances of the plague because the capitalist system was providing them convenience. Defoe found out about the class difference in society, and he penned down certain true aspects in his journal. H.F., the protagonist of this tale, narrated about the poor class and their behaviour during the plague. They were vulnerable to various problems in society. For instance, they were victims at the hands of doctors and quacks. He sketched a view of the 1600s when the poor were in a devastating situation and as well as they were suffering from psychological issues, for example, they were attacking people around them (Yousuf & Khaleel, 2021). The capitalist system granted power and protection to London’s aristocratic class while the lower class was vulnerable to all the troubles.

People of London were unable to speak for themselves. Marxism concept starts with the urge of basic desires of shelter and necessities (Parker, 2019). The journal delineates that the people of London were facing plague but were facing more devastation due to the capitalist system. The Londoners were vulnerable to various troubles and problems in London due to capitalism and the dictatorship of feudal lords.

The exploitation of the working class leads to social destruction, such as poverty, injustice, equality and exploitation (Masood & Shafi, 2020). Defoe depicted that the working class of London was under unfortunate circumstances because due to the plague and capitalist system, there were fewer opportunities left for them in London. The capital is the resource for the capitalists to become more powerful (Bowens et al., 2013). The methodology of textual analysis is used to analyse text through lens of Marxist theory.

#### 4. Data Analysis

Defoe shared his observations in his journal. He talks about the disaster due to the plague in London in 1664. The lower class was oppressed even before the plague. However, when the infection spread in London, it ruined them completely. Defoe explained the pathetic situation of the poor class, who were under the suppression of the upper class. The wealthy class was safe from the plague, while the poor class got infected due to distemper. Although, Marxism is a later theory, but the writers who were conscious about the class structures and structures of exploitation, wrote on similar lines as the Marxist consciousness outlined. Sardar wrote, “Marxist writers consciously condemn the callous exploitation of the poor class by the capitalist class and at the same time advocate a classless society” (Sardar, 2014, p. 27).

When the plague spread then, the aristocratic class migrated to other countries because obviously, they had resources and they could easily adjust to other areas. They migrated with their servants and their wealth. Defoe wrote, “The richer sort of people, especially the Nobility and Gentry, from the west part of the city thronged out of Town” (2008, p.5). The Marxist school of thought claims that one social class (the capitalist class) exploits and manipulates the interest of the proletariat class (Neesham & Dibben, 2016). So, as a manifestation of this thought, the journal also shows that the wealthy and aristocratic class migrated to another town while the poor and working-class was bound to remain in a state of disparity. The Marxist theory claimed that the capitalist class opposed the means and values of the lower working class. However, the lower classes were bound to stay in this hell. They did not have adequate money to move to other places.

Marxism argued that the capitalist class have access to all the means of production, and they own the factories and raw materials (Bowens et al., 2013). When capitalists own all means of production, there is nothing left for the poor class; they remain empty-handed and Londoners were dealing with the same situation. Defoe wrote, “the misery that was coming upon the city, and the unhappy condition of those that would be left in it” (Defoe, 2008, p.6).

The narrator described the miserable condition of the poor working class through different scenes as the poor class was the victim of painful conditions. The pathetic shrieks of children and women could be heard in the streets.

They were afraid of poverty, but, with time, the numbers of their enemies have increased like an infection. "Property has superior social status to labor, will lead to a system that divides society into masters and slaves (Neesham & Dibben, 2016, p. 123). The social system of Londoners divided the society and the society's foundation was on the imperialism. The poor people of London in 1664 were living below the poverty line. The status quo drew a firm line between the rich and the poor classes. The elite class of London and the poor people were living in separate areas. Defoe wrote, "it began to be suspected that the plague was among the people at the end of the town" (2008, p. 2). This was the place where the poor lived. The businessmen and trade men were living in the heart of London. Defoe wrote, "...and from that we call the Heart of the City, that is to say, among the wealthiest of the people" (2008, p. 12). These areas of London were quite wealthiest. However, on the other hand, poor laborers and manufacturers were living in the poor areas of London. Marxist ideal is that private properties like factories, stores and natural resources like mines should be equally under the control of everyone in society. But they all are under the control and monopolization of the capitalist system (Bowens et al., 2013). Throughout history, there has been a class struggle between these two groups. Labour class plays a significant role in the economy and prosperity of any country. But they remained marginalized and voiceless till the end of life. Even before the plague, the situation of the poor class was pathetic. The monarchy, royal class, and army officers were living in the heart of the London. The government provided them complete facilities, and the government was re-establishing them (Defoe, 2008). Defoe described that the government provided the aristocratic class amenity. In this region, the government was not paying attention to the lower class. Hundreds and thousands of people of labour class were bound to live in the small areas of parishes. Defoe argued that, "it was estimated that there was no less than a hundred thousand ribband weavers in and about the city; the chiefest number of whom, lived, in the Parishes" (2008, p.12).

In the journal, it is stated that after the plague, the authorities ordered that they would shut the poor infected people in their houses. The order was even worse than the disease. The government and higher authorities failed to facilitate the working class. Bowens et al. writes, "The modern expansion of capitalism is just as brutal and miserable for the workers and oppressed of the world as ever" (2013, p.26). Defoe's text delineated that the people of the inferior class were under suppression, and they were subalterns. The slaves were dependent on their masters. They were afraid that they could not find peace in their life. Servants were visiting futurists asking, "Will my mistress keep me, or will she turn me of? (Defoe, 2008, p.17). When their owners came to know that slaves were sick, they threw them out of their houses and left them. They were subalterns and could not raise their voices for their legal rights due to the control of the dominant class. They did not have any courage to ask for their rights. Various shreds of evidence in the text proved that they were subordinate. The capitalist system does not harm the upper class, and it provides them shelter. While on the other hand, it causes devastation for the poor class and deprives them of the basic necessities of life (Sardar, 2014). "As a result, the capitalist people become richer and richer while the natives become poor and poorer deprived of their ivory and other basic needs of life" (Sardar, 2014, p. 27).

Defoe explained the situation of the poor class in the journal that the upper class humiliated the lower class. Defoe shared an incident of a poor man in which a gentleman degraded a poor man and mocked him. The gentleman made fun of poor, "mocks and jeers at them". The gentleman belonged to upper class and he "taunted him with want of courage to leap into the great Pit, and go to Heaven" (Defoe, 2008, p. 40). This incident depicted that the poor working class of London was the victim of false consciousness. Marxist school of thought give the concept of the false consciousness that is a notion in which proletariat class remain ignorant and they misperceive the imperialist society. Furthermore, Marxist theory mentions proletariat class's ignorance in regards with upper class's injustice and exploitation. The Marxist theory claims that the working class remains unaware of the exploitation and injustices exercised by the bourgeoisie class (Masood & Shafi, 2020). The people of London in 1664 were not raising their voice against jeering. The people of upper class not only colonized the working class economically but they had also colonized the voice of the impoverished class. The plague did not bother the Magistrates and Lord Mayor's families of London. They always sent their slaves to the market to buy food for their families. They kept their families safe in their homes. Servants did not have any choices except to follow their rules. The subaltern belonged to a lower rank and inferior class, and the dominant groups robbed the rights of the subdominant groups. "The division of labour... manifests itself also in the ruling class... so that inside this class one part appears as thinkers of the class" (Sardar, 2014, p. 29). The dominant class promotes their thoughts and their ideas control the social and economic system. Similarly, in the journal, oppressed people were bound to provide facilities to them. Poor people were miserable because they did not have proper food or any physician. They did not even have a nurse to serve them during the plague. They were not ready to accept that situation and they were subordinate. "But here again, the misery that time lay upon the poor, who being infected, had neither food or physick; neither physician and nurse" (Defoe, 2008, p. 51). Similarly, people in London were facing marginalization and exploitation. The situation was so worse that the lower class was tortured mentally and physically due to the plague. According to Marxism, the proletariat class is under the control of the bourgeoisie class. That is why they condemn the capitalist social system and the exploitation of the working class. The theory of Marxism delineates the division between two classes and Marxists class claims that the society is under the

control of the affluent class (Singh Sardar, 2014). Karl Marx argues that the base shapes the superstructure. The superstructure consists of the affluent class who control the country and its resources. While on the other hand, the base structure is based on the labour class who work for the country and play a vital role in its economy. This journal provides clear evidence that the struggle between two classes is not new, but various generations have suffered and faced difficulty due to this economic and class conflict. In the journal, Defoe says that the prices of cheese and butter were so high that the labour class could not afford this for themselves. Only fruits were available to them. Marx talks about the alienation of products. Like labourers, they remained alienated from the products that they produced. They contributed to the formation of the products. However, these products remained inaccessible to them. According to Karl Marx, proletariat class play a role in producing products and the bourgeoisie class keep them alienated from their products (Parker, 2020). Similarly, Defoe says that the labour class provided butter and cheese to the nation. However, they remained alienated and deprived of their products. They were eating apples, cherries, grapes, and pears (Defoe, 2008). These fruits were causing problems in their gut because they were cheap and were available in excessive quantity. "Gripping of the fruit, surfeits, and the like, which often precipitated them into the plague" (Defoe, 2008, p. 132). The working class rushed into plague due to these unhealthy conditions. As Defoe claimed here that "Butter and cheese were dear for the same reason, and Hay in the Market just beyond White-Chapel Bars, was sold at 4.1 per load" (Defoe, 2008, p.138). Karl Marx pioneered the concept of commodification and alienation. Labourers remain alienated from their products. Although they have a great contribution in making these products, they cannot use their own products (Parker, 2019). Undoubtedly, the poor class of London contributed significantly to making cheese and butter, but the aristocratic class alienated them from their products. During the plague, the businessmen were still focusing on their businesses. They were continuously producing goods. Because due to the plague, there was a shortage of products in the market. Labourers were constantly working. "The master workmen, clothie and others, to the uttermost of their stocks and strength kept on making their goods to keep the poor at work" (Defoe, 2008, p.133). Marxist theory claims that the capitalist system is based on profit, and the profit is based on the exploitation of the bourgeois class (Mosley, 2011), so it is evident in the given excerpt that the poor were infected with plague and yet they had to work for the capitalist to sustain themselves through this testing time. Londoners were unemployed during the plague year and it is indeed easier to exploit the unemployed people. Marxism claims that the capitalist system targets unemployed workers and hires them on low wages. Furthermore, Marxists argue that class differences deliberately dragged the working class to unemployment and exploited them (Bowens et al., 2013). So, the working class was in a constant state of struggles. Also, the poor labour class dispersed in the different parts of the country due to the disease. Defoe narrates in his book that the laborers and poor people in the country cried for food. They were so helpless that they depended on charity. That was quite pitiable because authorities only gave them charity instead of proper work or facilities. This also brings us to the question of the legitimacy of government's system. Everyone was using labour just like slaves and for their purposes and benefits. According to the Marxist school of thought, when class antagonism arose, then during the class conflict, the economically dominant class gained political dominance in the state. The new class hold down the new means of production, and they exploit the working class (Miliband, 1970). Instead, they preferred to remain silent. In the novel narrator describes the situation of the poor, and he indicates that the poor remained quiet. Higher authorities stopped giving them charity after the plague. The situation became even worse than before. (Sardar, 2014). Later higher authorities stopped facilitating the poor class, and the situation of the poor became more tragic.

## 5. Conclusion

The people of London in 1664 were facing exploitation and an unstable situation, but they were unaware of this fact. The people of London were the victim of class distinction. Marx argued that people of the upper and inferior classes are not equal. This situation could only change with equality. Plagues and infectious diseases can spread anywhere. But the analyses shows that where there is imperialistic and capitalist approach of the aristocratic class, the lower classes suffer. Marxist aim of a classless society is significant in this context. It can also be connected with the situation of the current era's realities. As the COVID-19 pandemic spread, the lower classes suffered more because their work stopped as a result of lockdown. They had little or no access to better healthcare and thus there was a pitiful state of affairs for them. The ppessed people are underprivileged, and they are the victims of voicelessness. As Defoe write, "It was a very ill time to be sick in" (2008, p.15), when natural or other calamities befall, poor people are the easier preys. The Marxist sensibility provides a naked picture of the realities of civilized societies. Capitalist divide, class difference and working-class's marginalization in Defoe's text aligns it with Marxist theory.

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