

The Boarding House: A Marxist Feminist Reading

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Abstract

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This study offers a Marxist feminist reading of the short story "The Boarding House". It addresses the critical gap in Joyce critiques exposing the fact that how women are doubly oppressed in capitalistic society in the name of class and gender. It is a political story which portrays double suppressions of women in capitalist society. The oppressions of women in patriarchy, unpaid household jobs and commodification of women as sex objects are all influenced by capitalism. Although Mrs. Mooney has revolted against patriarchal suppressions, she has been entrapped by patriarchal ideologies in capitalism. The theoretical tool applied in this study is Marxist feminism and the rigorous textual analysis has been performed to explore the issue

within the text. This study is based on qualitative research design, interpretive approach and textual analysis method to explore intersectional oppression of women in capitalism in the name of sex and class.

Keywords: Capitalism, marriage, Marxist feminist, patriarchy, suppression

Introduction

Literary texts often incorporate cultural dimensions where there is intersection of social, political, economic and other ideological forces. In the story "The Boarding House", Joyce (2005) depicted that Mrs. Mooney, who gets divorce from her alcoholic husband, runs a boarding house on her own and lives with her daughter, Polly, and son, Jack; Polly gets involved in a love affair with Mr. Doran; although he does not like to marry her thinking that his family will not accept a low class half breed woman, he promises to marry Polly feeling guilty and being unable to resist Mrs. Mooney's power. Thus, the story portrays the intertwined relation of gender and class.

The story is set in the twentieth century Dublin. The main Physical setting is the boarding house, especially Mrs. Mooney's parlor and Doran's room. The social setting of Dublin is more important in the story. The importance of reputation in Dublin influences Mrs. Mooney and Mr. Doran to take decision about Polly. Hence, it reveals how the twentieth century Dublin is a social site for the interplay of class, morality and patriarchy.

Mrs. Mooney is the most developed character, a middle-aged big imposing woman and a butcher's daughter eloped with his foreman, and has a son and a daughter. She is a woman with strong determination making a living by running a boarding house, and she seems authoritarian in dealing with her children. Mr. Mooney is an absent character and Jack represents the Dubliners youth of that time. Miss Polly is a slim girl of nineteen, who does housework at her boarding house, seems a flirting girl at first but she fears her mother because she confesses everything in her affair with Doran to her mother. Mr. Doran, a serious young man of thirty-five, is a tenant at the boarding house and works for a wine merchant. He fears that he will ruin his prestige if he runs away from marriage with Polly. In this way, the story exposes how Mrs. Mooney challenges patriarchy and gets entangled by the power of patriarchy.

Walzl (1961) critiqued "The Boarding House" as a naturalistic story exposing the vulgarization of romance and marriage in Dublin since Mrs. Mooney forces Mr. Doran to marry Polly. Similarly, Booryazadeh, Faghfori, and Shamsi (2014) viewed "The Boarding House" as a cultural story of captivity, vulgarization of religion, romance, and the intellect. Likewise, Hutcheon and Butler (1981) found that "The Boarding House" as a story revealing the mechanization of love and humanity in this modern world. Boysen (2008) found "The Boarding House" as a critique of Catholicism, English imperialism and Capitalism as Mrs. Mooney entraps Mr. Doran to marry Polly for social security.

The above literature has established "The Boarding House" as a story exposing the social, moral and cultural quandaries of the twentieth century Dublin. However, it has not incorporated the sociopolitical dimension of the story. "The Boarding House" seems a fertile ground for the analysis of intersectionality of class subjugation and gender oppression in capitalism.

Marxist feminism views subjugation of women in the capitalism as the perpetuation of class domination. Gimenez (2000) argued that Marxist feminism attempts to explore the means of oppression of women in the capitalism. Delphy (2016) claimed that patriarchal domination functions along with economic system in capitalism, and she found family as central place for exploitation of women,

contracting them for unpaid labor through the institution of marriage. Therefore, this article attempts to analyze the short story "The Boarding House" through the perspective of Marxist feminism so that it will contribute to sociopolitical dimension of literature.

Literature Review

The short story "The Boarding House " has been analyzed from various perspectives. Relevant literature related to this story is briefly reviewed as given.

Walzl (1961) explained that "The Boarding House" is a naturalistic story depicting the vulgarization of romance and marriage in Dublin as Mrs. Mooney traps Mr. Doran to marry Polly. Similarly, Booryazadeh, Faghfori, and Shamsi (2014) found that "The Boarding House" is full of various cultural codes which have strong connection with other codes such as captivity, defeat, vulgarization of religion, romance, and the intellect, of Irish people under British Empire. However, in an earlier study, Köseman (2012) explored that "The Boarding House" is a dilemma of the early twentieth century women either to perform their responsibilities of household works or struggle for a meaningless emancipation, and an expression of stress and anxiety of their social lives.

The above literature shows that "The Boarding House" is a story that exposes the social quandaries of the early twentieth century Irish Society. The literature exposes that it is a story of dilemma of modern women whether to follow the traditional role or to seize the path of emancipation.

Rosenberg (1967) explained that Mr. Doran becomes victim of Polly's guile which may be the influence of Mrs. Mooney who deals with meat at her butcher's shop at first and later transact with live flesh at the boarding house. On the ironic dimension, Hutcheon and Butler (1981) found that "The Boarding House" is not just a story of entrapment of Doran into marriage but an implicit story revealing the degradation of marriage as a financial matter enforced by church, family, and business deal. However, Ting (2020) interpreted Mr. Doran's subjugation to the marriage with Polly as the powerplay of various sources such as family, social convention and his self-subjection.

The above writing shows that "The Boarding House" as a short story reveals the mechanization of love and humanity under the influences of various powers such as social, economic and cultural. It also discloses the degrading value of the marriage as a social institution in the modern society.

Senn (1986) explained that "The Boarding House" is a trapping story that presents how Mr. Doran caught in the trap of scheming Mrs. Mooney. Similarly, Kandel (2025) explored that "The Boarding House" is a story that reveals marriage as

an entrapment. He found that the instance of the forcible intention of Mrs. Mooney to settle the issue between Polly and Mr. Doran shows how marriage has been altered from the romantic relation to a coercive practice. However, Jabbar (2022) examined the role of male figures in "The Boarding House" and found that they are being irresponsible, and therefore Mrs. Mooney has to take decisive action.

The above literature shows that "The Boarding House" is a short story that exposes how social values and gender roles are changing over time. It also reveals that how the concept of marriage has been changed from normal social institution to restrictive practice.

Boysen (2008) interpreted that "The Boarding House" is a bitter critique of Dubliners who are paralyzed by Catholicism, English imperialism and Capitalism as Mrs. Mooney tricks an innocent man, Mr. Doran to marry Polly to get advantageous position in the society by degenerating love similar to organized prostitution. However, Ingersoll (1993) showed that "The Boarding House" presents Miss Polly as a woman character whose live is controlled by conventional feminine identity attached to her by the patriarchal society. Jensen (2017) also explained that "The Boarding House" presents the influences of Women's Rights Movement and unwillingness of most of the men to view woman in nontraditional roles like that of Mrs. Mooney. Rahman et. al. (2021) also stated that "The Boarding House" reveals the suppression of women in patriarchy focusing the relations of gender, power and economic forces; and they showed how Mrs. Mooney and Miss poly has become captive in patriarchy.

The above literature indicates that "The Boarding House" is a short story that embodies social, political, religious, and cultural dilemma of the early twentieth century Irish society. However, I believe that it is a political story, predominantly occupied by the gender role and class. There is a critical gap in Joyce critiques of interpreting "The Boarding House" as a socio-political story. The theoretical review also shows the intersectionality of gender and class. Therefore, the aim of this study is to explore Marxist feminist dimension of the story through its textual analysis.

Theoretical Review

Weeks (2011) argued that the phrase "(Un)Productive Labor" used by Marxist feminist of the 1970s to justify women's domestic labor in the patriarchal capitalist society is the continuation of the idea of Marx. She further claimed that the feminist argument of considering family labor as a unit within capitalism is the extension of Marx's argument that there cannot be domestic labor out of capitalist influence, and women's reproductive labor is central to economic development in capitalism. Similarly, Delphy (2016) argued that patriarchy operates along with economical

forces in capitalism, and she found the exploitation of women in marriage, binding them for unpaid domestic labor. Likewise, Armstrong (2020) explained that Marxist feminism historicizes women's unpaid labor in household jobs and reproduction in connection with production to reveal women's suppressions and exploitation in capitalism, and the important theories for Marxist feminists are theories of imperialism, accumulation of land and resources.

Sheivari (2014) reported that Marxist feminism as a theoretical tool to analyze various kinds of inequalities that lead to experiences of oppressions and exploitation for women, and aims to emancipate them by transforming the situation of suppression. However, in an earlier writing, Gimenez (2000) distinguished Marxist feminism from materialist feminism on the ground that Marxist feminism is more concerned with the devastating effects of capitalism on women. Stefano (2014) also distinguished Marxist feminism from other kinds of feminism by rejecting to treat "women" as a separate category avoiding the concept of class, and by its connection with working-class women in poor condition.

Guillaumin (2002) argued that racism and sexism are interdependent ideologies functioning together in the material exploitation of women. Similarly, Haug (2016) pointed out that Marxist feminism should address the question of how gender relations intersect with relations of class and race. However, Seneviratne (2018) identified a common shared ground for Marxist feminism, which talks about double oppression of women because of sex and class, and postcolonial feminism, which adds third factor, context, admitting the above two to analyze women's suppression in the capitalism.

The above theoretical literature shows that Marxist feminism is concerned with two factors: class and sex, and it treats the gender discrimination as the byproduct of class in systematic domination of capitalism. Therefore, the unpaid labor of women and reproduction should be understood in connection with production mechanism in capitalism.

Methods and Materials

As Schwartz-Shea (2021) said feminists apply interpretivist-qualitative approach to draw a closer view of phenomena, this study also employs qualitative research design, interpretive approach and textual analysis method to reveal the fact that how poor class women are in double oppression in the name of class and gender in the capitalist society with the help of thorough review of literature and the concerned theory. I searched the relevant research articles and criticism with the help of search engines such as Google and Google Scholar. The keywords 'capitalism', 'marriage', 'Marxist feminism', 'patriarchy' and 'suppression' in the story "The Boarding House" helped a lot to collect the secondary data and information related to

the critique of the story. Most of the research articles were taken from online and published journals and books. Since this research is guided by Marxist feminist theory (Weeks, 2011; Delphy, 2016; Armstrong, 2020) , I searched some of the theoretical criticism related to Marxist feminism to support my claim with evidence. For the data collection, I made close reading of the story “The Boarding House” and extracted the relevant portion of the text to support my thesis the double exploitation of women in capitalism in the name of sex and class. For the data analysis, I grouped the extracted text in various themes and analyzed them as suggested by Terry et al. (2017).

Textual Analysis and Interpretation

This article has made a Marxist feminist analysis of the short story “The Boarding House”. I have analyzed the results thematically based on textual evidence. For the organization of this part, I have divided it into three themes: gender and class subjugation in capitalism, entrapment of women in capitalism and exploitation of women in capitalism.

Gender and Class Subjugation in Capitalism

Gender and class subjugation intersect in capitalism (Stefano, 2014). Although "The Boarding House" presents the superficial depiction of the early twentieth century gender roles in Irish society, it is a feminist story on the basis of the characterization of three main characters: Mrs. Mooney, Mr. Doran and Miss Polly (Butler, retrieved 2020, May 23). The story begins with the remark " Mrs. Mooney was a butcher's daughter. She was a woman who was quite able to keep things to herself: a determined woman. She had married her father's foreman and opened a butcher's shop near Spring Gardens" (Joyce, 2005, p. 50). In the above text, the phrase "a determined woman" refers the boldness of Mrs. Mooney to challenge the suppressions of patriarchy, another phrase "a butcher's daughter" refers to her class, and leads to the idea that her revolt is actually against the capitalism that has made her father a mere puppet as Stefano (2014) explored that all facets of our lives are explicitly and implicitly governed by capitalism. Further, the narrator describes the family affairs of Mr. Mooney and Mrs. Mooney in the given lines.

He drank, plundered the till, ran headlong into debt.... By fighting his wife in the presence of customers and by buying bad meat he ruined his business. One night he went for his wife with the cleaver and she had to sleep a neighbor's house. (Joyce, 2005, p. 50)

In the above text, Mr. Mooney and Mrs. Mooney's relation and their family quarrel can be interpreted as the byproduct of the anxiety created by alienation in capitalism among working class as Marx and Engels (1845) defined alienation as a form of

human objectification. It can also be interpreted as how the proletarians are made a puppet for gender subjugation under capitalism.

Entrapment of women in Capitalism

In capitalism, women's attempt to get beyond patriarchy is undermined by the socioeconomic forces (Delphy, 2016). There is a sharp contrast in the characterization of Mrs. Mooney and Miss Polly. Mrs. Mooney is depicted as "a big imposing woman" that refers her newly gained power after the revolt against the patriarchy in capitalism. The narrator further describes her " She governed the house cunningly and firmly, knew when to give credit, when to be stern and when to let things pass. All the resident young men spoke of her as *The Madam*" (Joyce, 2005, pp. 50-51). Again, the phrase "The Madam" refers her active and powerful position in the boarding house after she subverts the domination of her husband, an agent of patriarchy in capitalism. The determination and confident in Mrs. Mooney can be examined through the narration that "She dealt with moral problems as a cleaver deals with meat: and in this case she had made up her mind" (Joyce, 2005, p. 52). It indicates that she has turned upside down her gender role in male-dominated society. Now she is manipulating and scheming over all men and women who lives in the boarding house. On the contrary, Miss Polly has been objectified as a thing of beauty, a mere commodity in the capitalism (Marx, 1867) , in her character definition in these lines.

Polly was a slim girl of nineteen; she had light soft hair and a small full mouth. Her eyes, which were grey with a shade of green through them, had a habit of glancing upwards when she spoke with anyone, which made her look like a little perverse Madonna. (Joyce, 2005, p. 51)

In the above lines, the beauty of the Polly is highly emphasized and her comparison with " a little perverse Madonna" has changed her as a sex object in capitalist society. Further, Mrs. Mooney "set her to do housework" and "give her the run of the young men" denote how Mrs. Mooney herself is paralyzed by capitalist influence as Weeks (2011) argued that there cannot be domestic labor free from capitalist influence. The contrastive position of Mrs. Mooney and Miss Polly depicted in the story has helped to crystallize the position of women in capitalist society what it is and what it should be (according to Marxist feminist).

Exploitation of Women in Capitalism

Women are doubly exploited in capitalism: in the name of gender and class (Seneviratne, 2018). Mr. Mooney's cruel behavior towards Mrs. Mooney and Mr. Doran's unwillingness to marry Polly expose the suppressions and exploitation of women in male-dominated capitalist society. Mrs. Mooney's reflection about Mr. Doran in the given text shows that how men seduce women in patriarchy.

He was thirty-four or thirty-five years of age, so that youth could not be pleaded as his excuse; nor could ignorance be his excuse since he was a man who had seen something of the world. He had simply taken advantage of Polly's youth and inexperience: that was evident. The question was: What reparation would he make? (Joyce, 2005, p. 53)

Mr. Doran is a man of decent family, perhaps representative of capitalist, exploits Polly sexually and seems reluctant to marry Polly thinking that she is of low class and brought up in uncivilized manner. It indicates the double exploitation of women in capitalism in matters of sex and class and it also brings the third element of suppression created by context (Seneviratne, 2018), British colonialism in Ireland. Mr. Doran's sexual seduction of Polly also shows the extensive exploitation of proletarians in capitalism.

In short, Mrs. Mooney is a representative character of modern feminist woman who opposes patriarchal oppressions in modern capitalist society. Nevertheless, Mrs. Mooney's negation of her own marriage and infatuation towards her daughter's marriage reveals the fact that how women are made paralyzed and infatuated towards the patriarchal ideologies in capitalist society.

Conclusion and Implications

This study explores that "The Boarding House" is a political story which exposes double oppressions (in the name of sex and class) of women in capitalist society. For example, Mrs. Mooney and Miss Polly have to suffer because they are women and belong to low class profile. The women's exploitation in patriarchy by binding them to unpaid house work through marriage is a byproduct of capitalism. Capitalism has commodified women as sex objects. For instance, Miss Polly's beauty is objectified in the story. Although Mrs. Mooney has tried to come out of patriarchal suppressions, she has been entangled by patriarchal ideologies in capitalism; for example, her negation as well as obsession towards marriage indicates the situation of entrapment.

This study helps to make women aware about their situation in capitalism and suggests them to come out of patriarchy practically. In theory, it contributes to the Marxist feminist understanding of the text "The Boarding House". It also widens the arena that a single literary text can be interpreted from various perspectives. It also paves the way of postcolonial interpretation of the story "The Boarding House" in future research as it refers the importance of context in the understanding of a text in its textual analysis and interpretation.

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