International Journal of Research in English

ISSN Print: 2664-8717
ISSN Online: 2664-8725
Impact Factor: RJIF 8.00
IJRE 2022; 4(2): 53-56
www.englishjournal.net
Received: 10-09-2022
Accepted: 17-10-2022
Published: 28-10-2022

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From False Consciousness to Revolutionary Praxis: A Dialectical Reading of *Mother*

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DOI: https://www.doi.org/10.33545/26648717.2022.v4.i2a.321

Abstract
Maxim Gorky's Mother is a seminal work that explores the transformation of Pelagea Nilovna, a working-class woman, from a state of false consciousness to active revolutionary praxis. This paper employs a dialectical Marxist-feminist framework to analyse Nilovna's journey, highlighting how her awakening to class consciousness and her subsequent participation in revolutionary activities reflect the broader struggle of the proletariat against capitalist oppression. By examining the interplay of gender and class in the novel, this study argues that *Mother* serves as a powerful representation of the dialectical process of social change, where individual awakening leads to collective action.

Keywords: Proletariat, representation, consciousness, oppression, ideology

Introduction

Maxim Gorky's *Mother* (1906) is widely regarded as one of the most significant works of socialist realism and revolutionary literature. Written in the backdrop of the growing revolutionary fervour in Russia, the novel is a powerful narrative that portrays the awakening of political consciousness among the working class. The novel captures the struggle of ordinary people against oppression, highlighting the emergence of a new revolutionary spirit that seeks to dismantle an exploitative system. *Mother* is deeply rooted in Gorky's own experiences, reflecting his first-hand observations of the conditions of the proletariat and their relentless fight for justice. As a committed socialist, Gorky's writing is infused with themes of class struggle, political awakening, and the transformative power of collective action. The novel follows the journey of Pelageya Nilovna Vlasova, a meek and submissive woman who undergoes a profound transformation as she witnesses the injustices suffered by her son and his comrades. Her evolution from a fearful, oppressed Mother to a courageous figure embodying the revolutionary cause is one of the most compelling aspects of the novel. Through her character, Gorky presents the idea that even the most unassuming individuals can become symbols of resistance and change. The title itself is emblematic of both the protagonist's personal transformation and the broader metaphorical role she assumes as the nurturing force behind the revolution.

The novel was written during a time of great political upheaval in Russia. The early 20th century witnessed growing dissatisfaction with the Tsarist regime, fuelled by rampant social inequalities, harsh working conditions, and the lack of political freedoms. The 1905 Russian Revolution, in particular, served as a precursor to the later Bolshevik Revolution of 1917. Gorky, a staunch supporter of the revolutionary cause, used his literary platform to inspire resistance and solidarity among the working class. His depiction of the factory workers' struggle in *Mother* was not merely fictional; it was a reflection of the real-life revolutionary activities brewing in Russia at the time. One of the most striking features of *Mother* is its commitment to socialist realism, a literary style that seeks to depict life as it is while simultaneously offering a vision for a socialist future. Unlike traditional realism, which often focuses on individual struggles and psychological depth, socialist realism emphasizes collective action and the necessity of social change. Gorky's novel is a precursor to the officially sanctioned literary movement that would dominate Soviet literature in the decades following the Russian Revolution. Moreover, *Mother* is notable for its emotional depth and humanistic portrayal of its characters. While the novel is undoubtedly political, it does not reduce its protagonists to mere ideological symbols. Instead, Gorky imbues them with

genuine emotions, conflicts, and personal transformations, making their struggles deeply relatable. Pelageya's journey, in particular, resonates with readers as she transitions from ignorance to enlightenment, fear to courage, and submission to active participation in the revolutionary cause.

In addition to its political and literary significance, *Mother* has had a lasting impact on global revolutionary movements. It has been translated into multiple languages and has inspired generations of political activists and writers. The novel was particularly influential in socialist and communist circles, often being used as a tool for political education and mobilization. This paper is an attempt to explore the thematic and ideological dimensions of *Mother*, examining how Gorky constructs his narrative to serve both as a literary masterpiece and a revolutionary manifesto. By analysing the novel's structure, characters, and historical context, we aim to understand its enduring relevance and significance in the broader landscape of political literature.

Theoretical Framework

Marxism is "a system of economic, social, and political philosophy based on ideas that view social change in terms of economic factors" (Mirunalini & Devi 13). As a social theory, Marxism encompasses the economic, political, and social doctrines developed by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels. It is rooted in the concepts of labour, social relations, and class struggle. Marxists argue that to resolve societal conflicts, a classless society must be established. Central to Marxist theory is the concept of class struggle, which arises between the working class (proletariat) and the capitalist class (bourgeoisie). The working class sells its labour to employers, while the bourgeoisie owns the means of production. This struggle is pivotal because it highlights the systemic oppression inherent in capitalist societies, which Marxists believe hinders societal progress. According to Marx, this oppression will inevitably lead to a proletarian revolution, resulting in the overthrow of capitalism and the establishment of a classless, communist society.

Marxism stands in direct opposition to capitalism. Marx argues that under capitalism, labour is alienated because workers are forced to sell their labour power in a market-driven system that prioritizes profit over human well-being. As Rosen notes, "Marx claims that the species-being of man consists in labour, and that man is alienated to the extent that labour is performed according to a division of labour dictated by the market" (Rosen 1). In contrast, Marxism advocates for the public ownership of the means of production, ensuring that the fruits of labour are collectively shared rather than appropriated by a small capitalist elite. Under capitalism, the proletariat owns only their labour power, which they must sell to survive, while the bourgeoisie controls the means of production and reaps the profits. For Marx, a class is defined by its members' relationship to the means of production. He argues that workers under capitalism are paid only a subsistence wage, barely enough to sustain themselves and their families. This exploitation is inherent to the capitalist system, where workers are treated as commodities and alienated from the products of their labour. Marx contends that this alienation leads to a loss of autonomy and creativity, reducing workers to mere cogs in the capitalist machine. Consequently, Marx predicts that the proletariat will eventually rise in revolution to overthrow the capitalist system and establish a socialist society. One of the key reasons for this revolutionary potential is the increasing misery of the working class under capitalism. Workers not only face economic exploitation but also lose their sense of identity, purpose, and even religious beliefs as they become alienated from their labour and the broader society. The bourgeoisie, in its pursuit of profit, opposes the freedom and self-realization of the working class. Marxists express deep sympathy for the proletariat, viewing their plight as universal. They argue that workers worldwide share similar conditions of exploitation and oppression, necessitating a global class consciousness to unite them in their struggle against capitalism. However, Marxists also recognize the concept of false consciousness, a critical ideological tool used by the ruling class to maintain its dominance. False consciousness refers to the inability of the working class to recognize their true class interests and the nature of their exploitation. Instead, they internalize the ideologies propagated by the bourgeoisie, which justify and perpetuate the existing social order. For example, capitalist ideologies often promote the idea that success is a result of individual effort, obscuring the structural inequalities inherent in the system. This false consciousness prevents workers from recognizing their collective power and the need for revolutionary change. The ruling class controls not only the means of production but also the superstructure of society, which includes institutions like education, religion, and media. These institutions disseminate ideologies that legitimize the capitalist system and reinforce false consciousness among the working class. Marx argues that exploitation is a fundamental element of capitalism, where the profit earned by capitalists is derived from the surplus value created by workers. In other words, workers are paid less than the value of what they produce, and the difference is appropriated as profit by the capitalists. This exploitation leads to the alienation and isolation of workers, who are deprived of the full benefits of their labour. In capitalist societies, workers sell their labour but do not own the means of production. Their wages are insufficient compared to the value they generate through their work. The bourgeoisie, who own the means of production, exploit the proletariat to maximize profits. This exploitation creates stark disparities in living conditions, education, and opportunities between the classes. With the rise of industrialism, the power dynamics shifted further in favour of the capitalists, who began to dominate and devalue the capacities and abilities of workers. Despite their exploitation, workers play a crucial role in determining the value of goods and services through their labour. Marxists argue that the hard work and difficult conditions endured by workers should be recognized and appreciated by society. However, under capitalism, this recognition is often denied, leading to resentment and resistance. As Utomo observes, "The resistance of working classes toward oppression from the capitalists sometimes triggers a revolution in which the working class seeks to change their lives and achieve a better future" (Utomo 17). This continuous struggle, Marxists believe, will ultimately lead to a proletarian revolution, resulting in the establishment of a classless society. Class consciousness is particularly important, as it involves workers recognizing their shared interests and collective power to challenge capitalist exploitation. Without class consciousness, workers remain trapped in false consciousness, unable to see beyond the ideologies that sustain their oppression.

The literature produced after the Industrial Revolution reflects the profound social and economic changes of the time. Using Marxist theory, "the society of the writer is reflected in their writings" (Radja 12). Writers influenced by Marxism often highlight the social and economic progress of their era while critiquing the significant gaps between social classes. They focus on representing the conflicts between the capitalist and working classes, illustrating how capitalist societies dehumanize individuals and perpetuate inequality. As Utomo notes, these writers "focus on the representation of social conflicts between capitalist and working classes" (Utomo 16), shedding light on the injustices inherent in the capitalist system. Marxism provides a critical framework for understanding the dynamics of class struggle, exploitation, and alienation under capitalism. It emphasizes the importance of class consciousness in overcoming false consciousness and achieving revolutionary change. By analysing literature and society through a Marxist lens, we can better understand the systemic inequalities and ideological mechanisms that sustain capitalist oppression, ultimately striving for a more just and equitable society.

Marxist-feminism critiques the dual oppression of women under capitalism, emphasizing the need for both class and gender liberation. Friedrich Engels, in The Origins of the Family, Private Property, and the State, argues that women's oppression is rooted in the capitalist system. In Mother, Nilovna's transformation is not only a class awakening but also a feminist one. Her journey from a submissive wife and Mother to a revolutionary leader challenges traditional gender roles and highlights the role of women in social change.

Nilovna's Journey of Transformation

Maxim Gorky's *Mother* is a seminal work that embodies the transition from false consciousness to revolutionary praxis through its protagonist, Nilovna. The novel, deeply rooted in Marxist-Feminist ideology, presents Nilovna's journey from a submissive, uneducated woman, entrenched in the ideological constructs of a patriarchal and capitalist society, to a revolutionary figure actively participating in the socialist movement. Gorky's portrayal of her transformation underscores the Marxist argument that liberation comes not through individual will alone but through collective revolutionary consciousness.

At the beginning of the novel, Nilovna is depicted as a naive, oppressed woman, resigned to her suffering. Nilovna's life is marked by poverty, abuse, and a lack of agency. Her initial state of false consciousness is evident in her acceptance of her subordinate role and her belief that her suffering is inevitable. She is unaware of the systemic nature of her oppression and views her hardships as personal misfortunes rather than the result of capitalist exploitation. At the beginning of the novel, Nilovna represents the archetypal proletarian woman, subject to both patriarchal and capitalist exploitation. Her husband, Michael Vlasov, is depicted as a hard-working yet bitter man who directs his frustrations onto his wife, reinforcing the gendered oppression that Marxist-Feminists argue is intertwined with class struggle. Gorky writes, "Her husband Michael Vlasov, was a pessimist who earned little and on every holiday used to beat somebody…" (Gorky 12) illustrating how patriarchal violence is a symptom of systemic economic oppression. Nilovna's transformation begins with her son, Pavel, who introduces her to revolutionary ideas. Pavel's reading of forbidden literature and his involvement in the socialist movement serve as catalysts for Nilovna's awakening. As Nilovna becomes more exposed to revolutionary ideas, she begins to question her previous acceptance of oppression. Her growing awareness of the systemic nature of her suffering marks the beginning of her transition from false consciousness to class consciousness. Nilovna's transformation culminates in her active participation in the revolutionary movement. After Pavel's arrest, she takes on the role of distributing revolutionary literature, becoming a key figure in the struggle against capitalist oppression. Her activism is not merely a personal rebellion but a collective effort to transform society. By embracing revolutionary praxis, Nilovna embodies the synthesis of individual awakening and collective action, illustrating the dialectical process of social change. Nilovna's initial acceptance of her suffering aligns with Marx's concept of false consciousness, wherein the oppressed internalize the dominant ideology that justifies their subjugation. She remains passive, believing that her suffering is inevitable, a belief further reinforced by her religious devotion: "She just began to pray in silence as a helpless Mother kneeling before the sacred image upon the wall." (Gorky 34). This moment encapsulates the way religion functions as an ideological apparatus that pacifies the oppressed, making them accept suffering rather than resist it.

The death of Vlasov marks a pivotal moment in Nilovna's life, as she shifts her focus to her son, Pavel. Initially, she resists his socialist inclinations, fearing for his safety and failing to grasp the ideological significance of his struggle. However, as she observes Pavel's growing dedication, she begins to question her own beliefs. Pavel's assertion, "I am reading forbidden books. They are forbidden to be read because they tell the truth about our—about workingmen's life," (Gorky 78) serves as a catalyst for Nilovna's ideological awakening. Through her son, she begins to see the injustices that have shaped her life not as natural or divine but as systemic and changeable.

Gorky portrays Nilovna's transformation not as an instant epiphany but as a gradual process where love becomes a conduit for ideological reorientation. Her initial fear and resistance mirror the struggles of the proletariat, who often hesitate to abandon ingrained beliefs. However, as she interacts with other revolutionaries, she moves from passive support to active participation: "Nilovna, many a times in the month sometimes dressing as a nun, or as a lace hawker, or a rich merchant's wife or a religious pilgrim, went here and there from one village to another to distribute the forbidden literature." (Gorky 145) This shift illustrates what Louis Althusser describes as a break from ideological interpellation—Nilovna no longer identifies with the oppressive structures that once defined her existence.

Nilovna's eventual full-fledged commitment to the revolutionary cause marks her transition from false consciousness to revolutionary praxis. Her transformation underscores Gorky's argument that women are not merely victims of oppression but active agents in dismantling oppressive systems. By distributing pamphlets and rallying workers, Nilovna embodies the Marxist-Feminist assertion that women's emancipation is intrinsically tied to the abolition of capitalism. Her rallying cry upon Pavel's arrest—"Long live the workers!" (Gorky 210)—symbolizes her complete ideological alignment with the movement.

Gorky extends this argument through other female characters such as Natasha and Sasha, who, despite their bourgeois backgrounds, embrace the proletarian struggle. Their defection from privilege reinforces the Marxist principle that class solidarity, rather than biological determinism, is the key to revolution. "This also shows that for the success of a revolution, participation of people from all walks of life of society is must." (Gorky 235). This statement highlights the dialectical nature of social transformation, where individuals must transcend their immediate material conditions to engage in collective struggle. Nilovna's arrest at the climax of the novel serves as both a tragic and triumphant moment. Though physically subdued, she remains ideologically unbroken, embodying the resilience necessary for revolutionary change. Her journey from a submissive wife to a revolutionary activist exemplifies the dialectical process through which false consciousness is shattered, and class consciousness emerges. Through *Mother*, Gorky not only critiques capitalist and patriarchal structures but also presents a vision of revolutionary feminism that aligns with socialist ideals. Nilovna's story serves as an enduring testament to the power of education, solidarity, and political activism in the fight against oppression. In this sense, her final act of defiance—singing the song of revolution despite her brutalization—transcends her individual struggle and becomes a call to arms for all the oppressed: "Our march is to join our suffering comrades." (Gorky 278) Gorky's novel, thus, remains a vital text in understanding the intersection of gender, class, and revolutionary praxis.

Symbolically, Nilovna can be seen as a representation of Mother Russia, who gradually embraces the revolutionary ideology. Her transformation mirrors the broader awakening of the Russian proletariat, culminating in the 1917 Revolution. The novel's title, Mother, underscores the central role of women in revolutionary movements, both as nurturers and as active participants. Mother is often considered the first socialist realist novel, a genre that seeks to depict the struggles of the working class and the potential for revolutionary change. The novel's emphasis on collective action and the transformative power of revolutionary praxis aligns with the principles of socialist realism.

Conclusion

Maxim Gorky's Mother offers a powerful depiction of the dialectical process of social change, as seen through the transformation of Pelagea Nilovna from a state of false consciousness to revolutionary praxis. By applying a Marxist-feminist lens, this paper has highlighted the intersection of gender and class oppression in the novel, as well as the potential for collective action to challenge systemic exploitation. Nilovna's journey serves as a testament to the transformative power of revolutionary ideas and the crucial role of women in social movements.

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