



## Marxist Analysis of Leo Tolstoy's "The Death of Ivan Ilyich"

**Zoofishan Anjum**

MS Scholar, COMSATS University Islamabad, [khanzoofishan0@gmail.com](mailto:khanzoofishan0@gmail.com)

**Dr. Sadia Siddiq**

Assistant Professor, Humanities, CUI Islamabad Campus.  
[sadia\\_siddiq@comsats.edu.pk](mailto:sadia_siddiq@comsats.edu.pk)

**Ms. Saba Bahareen Mansur**

Assistant Professor, Humanities, CUI Islamabad Campus.  
[sbahareen@comsats.edu.pk](mailto:sbahareen@comsats.edu.pk)

### Abstract

As a philosophical doctrine, Marxism criticizes Capitalism as a dehumanizing system that not only alienates individuals from the masses by creating class distinctions but also compels them to follow the false ideals of success in capitalist society. Although a lot of research works have been done on Leo Tolstoy's text at hand, "The death of Ivan Ilyich" with reference to different theoretical perspectives, there is still room to explore the selected text from the Marxist lens. The paper thus aims to offer a comprehensive, Marxist analysis of Leo Tolstoy's masterpiece, "The Death of Ivan Ilyich." Employing qualitative research techniques. This research paper focuses to unveil the impacts of political, economic and materialist conditions on the social conditions of the characters in a capitalist society. Analyzing the main character's life, this research paper explores not only the exploitation of the proletariat by the bourgeoisie but also illustrates how Ivan's struggles to ascend socially and fulfill materialistic desires. The findings of the research showcases the protagonist's downfall reflecting Marx's assertion that capitalist societies foster false personas, prioritizing superficial aspects of bourgeoisie's lifestyle such as materialism over genuine human connections.

**Keywords:** Marxism, Capitalist Society, Leo Tolstoy, Super Structure Model, Superficial bourgeoisie's lifestyle.

### Introduction

Marxists philosophy offers an insightful account of social, political and economic injustice. It typically aims not only to criticize but also condemn Capitalism as a dehumanizing system that alienates individuals from the masses by creating class distinctions in the society. Its ideals thus propose that in such a brute capitalist system, the economic and political conditions determine not only the social conditions of the individuals, but also shape their consciousness, and the overall landscape in which they are living. Therefore, they assert that in order to understand this social reality of such individuals, it is of paramount importance that one must



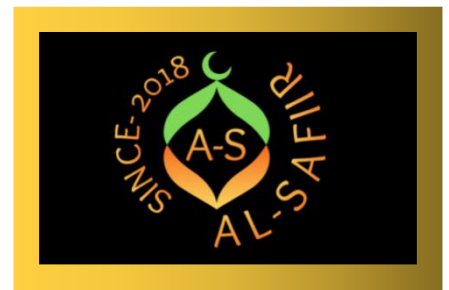
understand these underlying economic and political conditions and structures that are shaping their identities. So, the best way to understand the ills of the society that Marxists critics recommend is to understand the society in terms of class struggle between the capitalist and working class.

Leo Tolstoy is one of the most prolific and eminent Russian novelists who has produced many great works of literature. The text, "The Death of Ivan Ilych", is also one of his masterpieces in which he has explored many great insights including the exploitation of the poor at the hands of the rich, social alienation, existential angst and mimicking the superficial bourgeois lifestyle. Viladimir Nabokov, one of the Russian-American critics, believes that "The death of Ivan Ilych" is Tolstoy's most artistic, most perfect, and most sophisticated achievement.

In this research, Marxist lens is used to scan the complex network of class struggles, devolutions, and materialism contrived into the narrative. The text at hand is the perfect embodiment of what the ideals of Marxism believed. It unveils not only the explicatory ways of the bourgeoisie but also unravels the ways in which the proletariat class mimics bourgeoisie superficial ways of lifestyle in order to only look and feel important. Not only the protagonist but everybody around him is busy in the blind pursuit of materialism avoiding the true charm of life. Thus, the findings of the research showcases the protagonist's downfall reflecting Marx's assertion that capitalist societies foster false personas, prioritizing superficial aspects of bourgeoisie's lifestyle such as materialism over genuine human connections.

## Literature Review

The analysis of *The Death of Ivan Ilyich* through a Marxist lens aligns with extensive scholarly discussions on the intersection of literature and ideology. Marxist literary criticism, as articulated by theorists such as Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels, and later scholars like Terry Eagleton and Louis Althusser, provides a framework for understanding how capitalist structures influence individual consciousness and social relations. This literature review explores existing scholarship on Marxist interpretations of literature, class struggle, alienation, and ideological control, particularly in relation to Tolstoy's novella. Marxist literary theory asserts that literature is a product of the socio-economic structures within which it is created (Eagleton, 1976). Scholars argue that literature often reflects and critiques the dominant ideologies of its time, as seen in *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*, which exposes the illusory nature of social mobility. The bourgeois pursuit of wealth and status, evident in Ivan Ilyich's life, serves as a critique of capitalism's false promise of upward mobility (Jameson, 1981). According to Eagleton (1991), capitalist ideology conditions individuals to internalize class distinctions, ultimately leading to their own subjugation. The theme of alienation in literature has been widely examined in Marxist criticism, with Karl Marx's theory of alienation providing a foundational perspective (Marx, 1844). Marx posited that capitalist societies estrange individuals from their labor, their fellow humans, and even their own essence. This theory finds resonance in Tolstoy's novella, where Ivan Ilyich's relentless pursuit of career success leads to emotional isolation from his family and colleagues. Scholars such as Lukács (1971) argue that capitalist realism in literature often portrays characters who internalize dominant ideological narratives, which reinforces systemic



alienation. Another significant focus of Marxist literary criticism is the superficiality of the bourgeois lifestyle. Studies in this area highlight how capitalist societies prioritize material success over authentic human relationships (Williams, 1977). In *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*, Tolstoy's portrayal of Ivan's peers and family members—who remain emotionally detached despite his suffering—exemplifies this critique.

Althusser (1971) expands on this idea by suggesting that ideology operates through social institutions such as the family, education, and the workplace, conditioning individuals to uphold capitalist values unconsciously. The contrast between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat is another recurrent theme in Marxist criticism. Scholars emphasize the role of proletarian figures in exposing capitalist exploitation (Prawer, 1976). In Tolstoy's novella, Gerasim, a working-class servant, represents an alternative to the detachment of the bourgeoisie, offering genuine care and compassion to the dying Ivan Ilyich. This dynamic aligns with Marxist arguments that the working class maintains a more authentic connection to human existence due to its distance from capitalist indoctrination. Moreover, the concept of false consciousness, as discussed by theorists like Gramsci (1971) and Althusser (1971), is central to understanding Ivan Ilyich's complicity in capitalist oppression. He internalizes bourgeois ideology and aspires to replicate the upper-class lifestyle, despite suffering under its pressures. Scholars argue that literature frequently illustrates how individuals become active participants in their own subjugation, as seen in Tolstoy's protagonist (Eagleton, 2002). Finally, the notion of death as liberation in Marxist interpretations of literature suggests that characters often attain true consciousness only at the end of their lives. Critics argue that Ivan Ilyich's final realization represents a moment of ideological rupture, where he finally recognizes the superficiality of his existence (Jameson, 1981). This aligns with the idea that literature can serve as a tool for ideological critique, challenging readers to reconsider the values they have internalized. The existing literature on Marxist criticism provides a robust framework for analyzing *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*. The novella's depiction of class struggle, alienation, ideological conditioning, and false consciousness resonates with foundational Marxist theories. By illustrating the hollowness of bourgeois aspirations and the contrast between the ruling and working classes, Tolstoy's work serves as a critique of capitalist ideologies. The theoretical perspectives outlined in this review establish a foundation for understanding how literature functions as a reflection and critique of socio-economic structures.

## Problem Statement

Marxists ideals uphold that individuals in capitalist society are isolated from their true selves, busy in the blind pursuit of social status and mimicking the superficial nature of the bourgeois lifestyle. The issue thus addressed in this research is the need to explore how the selected text unveils the societal consequences of capitalist ideologies, exposing the superficiality of bourgeoisie lifestyle and the exploitation of the proletariat.

## Research Questions

1. How do the interactions between characters in the text represent Marxist perspective?



2. How do the Marxist elements in the text highlight the superficial and conformist nature of Russian society?

## Research Objectives

1. To investigate instances of interactions between the characters in the text representing Marxists perspective.
2. To trace out elements of Marxists philosophy in the text highlighting the superficial bourgeoisie lifestyle and conformist nature of Russian society.

## Significance of the Research

The paper at hand holds significance in deepening our understanding of how Marxist principles manifest in Tolstoy's "The Death of Ivan Ilyich." By exploring the interactions among characters, it sheds light on the societal consequences of capitalist ideologies, emphasizing the superficiality of the bourgeoisie lifestyle and the exploitation of the proletariat. This paper will be useful further for the readers in exploring and understanding themes and various socio-economic ideologies embedded in texts through the analysis of Marxism.

## Delimitation

The study specifically focuses on Marxist Ideology in the novella *The Death of Ivan Ilyich* by Leo Tolstoy. The class struggle between bourgeoisie and proletariat is explored along with the suffering that Ivan Ilyich had to face while living in the capitalist society that focuses on material success and is led by the exploitation of proletariats.

## Theoretical Framework

Marxism is basically an umbrella term often known as a body of social, political, and economical doctrines, foundationally developed by Karl Marx, a prolific German philosopher in his seminal work *Communist Manifesto* (1866) and further improvised and popularized by Friedrich Engels in his masterpiece work *The German Ideology* (1846) in the mid-nineteenth century.

Offering a valuable philosophy of social, political and economic injustice, Marxism typically aims not only to criticize but also condemn Capitalism as a dehumanizing system that alienates individuals from the masses by creating class distinctions in the society. Its ideals thus propose that in such a brute capitalist system, the economic and political condition determine not only the social conditions of the individuals, but also shapes their consciousness, and the overall landscape in which they are living. Therefore, they assert that in order to understand this social reality of such individuals, it is of paramount importance that one must understand these underlying economic and political conditions and structures that are shaping their identities. So, the best way to understand the ills of the society that Marxists critics recommend is to understand the society in terms of class struggle between the capitalist and working class as Marx entails, "the history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles." (Marx, 1866, p. 17)

Thus, the Marxists' critics oppose the domination of one class over the other and hope to imagine a classless society where everybody can have the equal opportunity to have a prosperous life.



Alongside its vitality in other fields of knowledge, Marxism also offers an extensive critical perspective to literature and since its birth different literary theorists have been using it for the comprehension of literature. Therefore, to solidify and extend Marxists philosophy further, different theorists not only added into Marxists philosophy, but also tried their best to productively explore the ills of the society in their respective works. For instance, George Lukacs, an eminent Soviet socialist realist not only modified but also expanded and adopted Marx's original thoughts in Literature in order to comprehend human conditions truthfully in his masterpiece work, *History and Class Consciousness* (1923). Lukas, being the strong believer of realism in literature claims, "Realism is the only way in the compression of human condition in its truest form" (Lukacs, 1923). In addition, he believes, human nature is inseparable from its social realities because man is but a product of his society (Lukacs, 1923).

Thus, Lukas believed that any literary piece is only of paramount importance if it articulates the "dialectic characteristics of human as individuals and humans as social beings (Lukacs, 1923)", considering it the only way to avoid alienation and creation of class distinction in a capitalist society.

Expanding Marx's work ahead, the Italian theorist, Antonio Gramsci while introducing his seminal concept of 'Hegemony' in Prison Notebook (1971) adds into the philosophical accounts of Lukas that solely the sociological and ideological conditions cannot inculcate the dominant values of the society into the psyche of the individuals and can shape their identity rather individuals themselves "forgets their own desires and thus assimilate the dominant values (Gramsci, 1971)". Literature and art, according to him, contributes to this internalization of dominant values practiced by the elites. Gramsci calls this internalization of dominant values by the lower class of the society as 'assimilation or domination' by 'consent', which is the very definition of the concept of hegemony according to Gramsci.

Improvising upon Marx's philosophical endeavor, the French theorist, Althusser adds into Gramsci's concept of hegemony that "any ideology and hegemonic prevailing philosophy in any society or discipline presents a constructed version of reality which does not reflect the actual conditions of the of life", and individuals assimilate and internalize these Ideologies just because they are dominant through different states apparatuses such as education in a capitalist society (Althusser, 1970)

Terry Eagleton while exploring the relationship between ideology and literature in his extraordinary work, "Marxism and Literary Criticism" (1976) asserts, "literary and ideology go hand and hand in reinforcement or challenge the dominant ideologies" in capitalist society.

Last but not the least, Raymond Williams, in his artistic work, *Culture and Society* (1958) introduces the concept of, 'Cultural Materialism' by asserting that the dominant and materialistic conditions of the particular society also influence and shape dominant discourses in the capitalist society.

These different theorists thus not only extends Marx's philosophy in their respective works but also tries to unveil dominant patterns of thought and behavior practiced by the upper class and





inculcated by the lower by the means of different state's apparatuses in the dehumanizing capitalist society.

## Research Methodology

The research paper employs a qualitative approach by using the "Base and Structure model" proposed by Marx in his masterpiece work Communist Manifesto (1866) for analysis of the text. According to this model, an individual's social identity is largely determined by the political and economic conditions in which he is born into. As he states, "It is not the consciousness of men that determines their being, but on the contrary, their social being determines their consciousness" (Marx, 1865, p. 165). Simply saying, the social class into which a person is born determines his outlook and viewpoints. Further, Marx then extends this concept of determination into one of the central concepts of Marxism, that of base and superstructure. According to him, the base is an economic system on which the superstructure rests. He believes that cultural activities such as philosophy or literature belong to superstructure. The Marxist critics explained in the theoretical framework section that a society's economic base determines the interests and styles of its literature; it is this relationship between the determining base they believe that determines superstructure that is the main point of interest for Marxist critics.

In addition, from the economic base, emerges a "superstructure" including a government that functions to legitimize the capitalist class that has economic means of production. Furthermore, the superstructure also consists of "forms of social consciousness" the aesthetic, ethical, political, and religious ideologies that also serve to legitimize the power of the ruling class.

## Discussion and Data Analysis

The death of Ivan Ilyich is a novella by Leo Tolstoy. The title of the novella symbolizes the death of a true persona in the blind pursuit of materialism. Death in the novella also resonates with the idea of freedom from the capitalist and superficial world. The novella tells about the ills of a modern Russian society and also the people in the society who are driven by materialistic desires. The consciousness of Ivan is shaped by the bourgeoisie society in which he lives which refers to the lies of death and absurdity which according to Camus is the heart of bourgeoisie society. The novella depicts the frailty and artificial nature of the life human beings live and thus enfold the collective life of society and the eventual death of an individual considering the characteristics of the common people in the society. The characters have been living a lie as they refuse to admit their own mortality which allows them to remain blind to all other ways in which their lives are false.

*"He sought his former accustomed fear of death and did not find it. "Where is it? What death?" There was no fear because there was no death. In place of death there was light."(p. 58)*

These lines were spoken by Ivan which highlights his priorities in his life and the things that hold true meaning for him were his material pursuits which blinded him. The wrongful use of excessive money leads to the avoidance of life and the sufferings that it brings. Furthermore,

# Al-Safiir

<https://al-safiir.com/index.php/Al-Safiir/About-the-Journal>

**2709-605X**

Online ISSN

**2709-6041**

Print ISSN



through the thoughts and actions of the characters, the authors of the Communist Manifesto discuss the bourgeoisie.

The themes of 'falsity' and 'lies' are central to this novella as it was made clear from the beginning. The characters masked their selfish inflections and thoughts behind actions that were considered to be accurate and respectful. Ivan lied about his pleasant life and suffered from a lie that he is not dying but simply ill. This is the reason which escalated his physical pain and dragged him towards the darkness.

*"False. Everything by which you have lived and live now is all a deception, a lie, concealing both life and death from you."*

*"What tormented Ivan Ilych most was the deception, the lie, which for some reason they all accepted, that he was not dying but was simply ill, and that he only need keep quiet and undergo a treatment and then something very good would result."(p. 45)*

The death of Ivan Ilych can be taken as a mirror to a society that feels proud but doesn't have any reason for it. Ivan developed his illness while designing his house which he thinks will impress the upper class. He never examined his life in a meaningful way. Ivan Ilyach was just a puppet who was responsible for making others happy through his money and status. *In these latter days he would go into the drawing-room where he had arranged that drawing-room where he had fallen and for the sake of which (how bitterly ridiculous it seemed) he had sacrificed his life for he knew that his illness originated with that knock. He would enter and see that something had scratched the polished table. (P. 42)*

His own mental peace and happiness are lost as he was recalling his childhood memories and felt pain when he was thinking of his present life. For all his life, Ivan was running away from the problems and even ignored his illness that eventually brought his downfall.

*"Ivan Ilych noticed, or thought he noticed, a strange attitude towards himself. It sometimes seemed to him that people were watching him inquisitively as a man whose place might soon be vacant". (P. 33)*

Ivan's hesitation to face the idea of death pairs with his stubborn reluctance to see where he went wrong with his life. It is correct that he was not true to those around him because he was struggling to maintain his image as a unique and wealthy man. He hides his suffering from his family and his friends that lead to the lack of true friendships.

The analysis also incorporates what the writers of Communist Manifesto wrote about the bourgeoisie who are self-centered and oppressive and thus are distanced from the family which is evident throughout the novella. Ivan's appearance deteriorates throughout the novella and there was "no spark of light in his eyes" (p. 86). It is evident in the beginning that his colleagues do not care about his death but they are focused on the position they will get after his death. In reality, Ivan was alone, when he realized the arrangement of his family and all his social interests which were actually false.

*"He was very happy when he met his family at the station and brought them to the newly furnished house all lit up, where a footman in a white tie opened the door into the hall*

# Al-Safiir

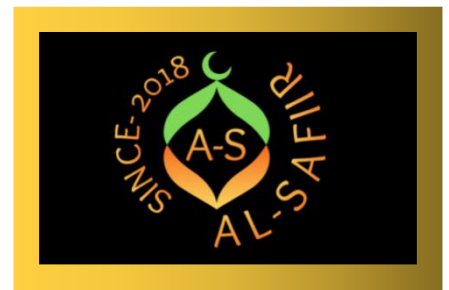
<https://al-safiir.com/index.php/Al-Safiir/About-the-Journal>

2709-605X

Online ISSN

2709-6041

Print ISSN



*decorated with plants, and when they went on into the drawing-room and the study uttering exclamations of delight".(p.24)*

The analysis of these lines also aligns with the concept of Hegemony given by Antonio Gramsci according to which Ivan Ilyach mimicked every move of the upper class by internalizing all the dominant values but ultimately failed out to live a meaningful life from his own point of view. Luckas in his work history and class consciousness states that man is a product of a society he is residing in. Ivan was seen as a successful and an accomplished man but on the inside he was very disappointed and annoyed. In the other words he has failed.

Ivan values his role in society as an individual who tries to confirm himself as a social lite which aligns with the idea of Cultural Materialism given by Williams who states that materialistic conditions form dominant discourses in a society.

*"Believe me... "and she again began talking and brought out what was evidently her chief concern with him—namely, to question him as to how she could obtain a grant of money from the government on the occasion of her husband's death. (P .09)*

These lines were uttered by Ivan's wife whose main concern is the grant of money from the government on the death of his husband. Gerasim on the other hand represents a hardworking and empathetic proletariat who stays with Ivan and cares about him as he has Strong Hands.

The protagonist's final thoughts and feelings before his death play a crucial part in my agreement; he lays on his deathbed sincerely sorry for all that he has put his family through because of his lies. Ivan struggles to show his true feelings. *"Ivan wanted to weep, wanted to be petted and cried over " (p.46).* He realized that he had failed himself, his family, his friends, and his work with his lies.

*"This falsity around him and within him did more than anything else to poison his last days". (p.47)*

The lie about his false life is ruptured and the pain is so severe that it causes him to scream. Ivan's focus on the outward appearances and societal conventions shows the emptiness of a purely materialistic existence which ultimately leads him to question the meaning of life. Tolstoy through the novella challenges the capitalistic society whose idols are rather superficial to which Illiyach reacts with his illness that displays the profound representation of what the Communist Manifesto states.

## Conclusion

Marxist Analysis of a novella reveals the negative impacts of materialism on people in society. The narrative expresses the variety of ways in which Marxism is evident such as the character of Ivan Illiyach, social classes or meaninglessness of life. Through the analysis of the text, the exploitation of the proletariat in the hands of bourgeoisie is evident as Ivan Illiyach who belonged to a middle class family and struggles to fulfill his materialistic desires but faces existentialism. It highlights how the protagonist struggles to become a part of the upper class by buying an expensive house and securing a position for which the other companions wish for. Ivan suffered because he was blinded by the artificiality and the pettiness of the society which



# Al-Safiir

<https://al-safiir.com/index.php/Al-Safiir/About-the-Journal>

2709-605X

Online ISSN

2709-6041

Print ISSN



brought upon an existential crisis and the capitalistic desires causing the characters downfall. Marx argues that the capitalist society causes individuals to display a false persona, accentuating the superficial elements of life such as materialism and the social status over the family relations.

## Findings

The findings of the study reveal that *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*, when analyzed through a Marxist lens, highlights the illusion of material success and social mobility. Ivan Ilyich devotes his life to attaining a comfortable bourgeois lifestyle, under the belief that wealth and status will bring him happiness. However, his realization on his deathbed exposes the emptiness of these aspirations, demonstrating the Marxist critique of capitalism, which falsely promises social mobility while ultimately maintaining class divisions. The findings further indicate that Ivan Ilyich experiences profound alienation from authentic human relationships. His relentless pursuit of career advancement and societal approval leads to emotional detachment from his family and colleagues. This reflects Karl Marx's theory of alienation, which argues that individuals in a capitalist society become estranged from their true selves and meaningful social connections due to their fixation on material success and social validation. Additionally, the study reveals the superficiality of the bourgeois lifestyle as portrayed in the novel. The characters, including Ivan Ilyich himself, prioritize societal expectations and appearances over genuine human experiences. Even as he suffers, his peers and family members remain emotionally distant, preoccupied with their own comfort and ambitions. This finding aligns with the Marxist critique of capitalist ideology, which conditions individuals to internalize and perpetuate such values. Furthermore, the study uncovers the novel's subtle depiction of proletarian exploitation by the bourgeoisie. While the upper-class characters engage in luxury and social status games, Gerasim, a working-class servant, emerges as the only figure who shows genuine care and compassion for Ivan Ilyich. His acceptance of life's realities contrasts sharply with the detachment of the bourgeoisie, reinforcing the Marxist perspective that the working class maintains a more authentic connection to human existence. The findings also suggest that although Ivan Ilyich is a victim of the capitalist system, he actively participates in reinforcing its values. He internalizes dominant ideologies and aspires to replicate the upper-class lifestyle, even at the expense of his personal well-being. This supports Louis Althusser's argument that ideology is perpetuated through social institutions, leading individuals to willingly conform to oppressive structures. Finally, the findings reveal that Ivan Ilyich's death serves as a metaphor for liberation from capitalist oppression. His final realization of the superficiality of his existence represents an awakening from the false consciousness imposed by bourgeois ideology. In this moment, he breaks free from the illusion of material success and societal approval, suggesting that true freedom lies in rejecting the deceptive values of capitalism.

## References

- Althusser, L. (1971). *Lenin and philosophy and other essays* (B. Brewster, Trans.). New Left Books.
- Eagleton, T. (1976). *Marxism and literary criticism*. Routledge.

# Al-Safiir

<https://al-safiir.com/index.php/Al-Safiir/About-the-Journal>

**2709-605X**

Online ISSN

**2709-6041**

Print ISSN



Eagleton, T. (1991). *Ideology: An introduction*. Verso.

Eagleton, T. (2002). *The idea of culture*. Blackwell.

Gramsci, A. (1971). *Selections from the prison notebooks* (Q. Hoare & G. Nowell-Smith, Eds. & Trans.). International Publishers.

Jameson, F. (1981). *The political unconscious: Narrative as a socially symbolic act*. Cornell University Press.

Lukács, G. (1971). *The theory of the novel: A historico-philosophical essay on the forms of great epic literature* (A. Bostock, Trans.). MIT Press.

Marx, K. (1844). *Economic and philosophic manuscripts of 1844* (M. Milligan, Trans.). Progress Publishers.

Prawer, S. S. (1976). *Karl Marx and world literature*. Oxford University Press.

Williams, R. (1977). *Marxism and literature*. Oxford University Press