



Struggle and Class Conflict: an Analysis of Social Domination in *Red Rising* by Pierce Brown

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Abstract. This study analyzes the representation of social domination and class conflict in Pierce Brown's science fiction novel *Red Rising*. Building on the perspective that literary works reflect and critique social realities, the main focus of this study is on the social class structure, exploitation, and dynamics of resistance depicted in the narrative. The research aims to examine the color-based caste system that shapes the societal hierarchy in the novel and how class conflict and resistance against this system are manifested through the journey of the main character, Darrow. Utilizing Karl Marx's Marxist theory as a theoretical framework, this study explores key concepts such as social class, ideology as a tool of domination, class conflict, and alienation. A descriptive qualitative approach, combined with intrinsic (structuralist) analysis and Marxist literary criticism, is employed to analyze data from the novel's narrative, dialogues, and setting descriptions. The findings indicate that the society in *Red Rising* exhibits an extreme class division: the Reds as the ruling bourgeoisie controlling all aspects of life, and the Golds as the proletariat living in brutal exploitation and inhumane working conditions. Gold domination is maintained through claims of genetic superiority, ideological manipulation that creates "false consciousness," and strict military force and information control. Darrow's journey, initially alienated and influenced by propaganda, drastically changes after the death of his wife, Eo, which ignites his class consciousness. This transformation compels Darrow to infiltrate the Gold system and lead strategic resistance from within, establishing him as a symbol of proletarian revolution demonstrating the potential for radical social change.

Keywords: *Alienation, Class Conflict, Marxist Theory, Red Rising, Socio-Political.*

INTRODUCTION

Literature serves as an important medium through which social realities, both personal and collective, are represented and examined. Beyond its aesthetic function, literature provides a powerful avenue for critiquing social, political, and economic systems. This capacity is particularly evident in dystopian and speculative fiction, which often presents exaggerated versions of existing societal problems, such as inequality, oppression, and class division. These narratives not only entertain but also challenge readers to confront real-world issues, thereby functioning as both mirrors and critiques of contemporary society.

One of the recurring themes in such literature is class conflict. This theme has deep historical and philosophical roots, especially in Marxist theory, which offers a systematic lens for analyzing power relations between different social classes. Karl Marx (1867) theorized that all human history is essentially the history of class struggles, identifying two dominant classes: the bourgeoisie, who control the means of production, and the proletariat, who sell their labor to survive. This division leads to exploitation, alienation, and ultimately, social upheaval. Marx also emphasized the role of ideology—a set of beliefs imposed by the dominant class to legitimize their control—arguing that the working class often remains unaware of their subjugation due to “false consciousness.” Building upon Marx’s foundational work, Antonio Gramsci (1971) introduced the concept of hegemony, wherein the ruling class maintains control not only through force but also through the subtle dissemination of dominant ideologies via cultural and educational institutions. These ideas become internalized by the oppressed class, creating a system in which domination appears natural and resistance becomes difficult. This theoretical framework provides valuable tools for understanding how power operates in both fictional and real societies, and how literature can serve as a means to expose and challenge such mechanisms.

The novel *Red Rising* (2014) by Pierce Brown offers a rich terrain for this kind of literary examination. Set in a futuristic Martian society, the novel depicts a rigid color-coded caste system where each social class is assigned a specific function. The protagonist, Darrow, is born into the lowest class—the Reds—who labor underground under the false belief that they are terraforming Mars for future generations. In reality, Mars has long been inhabited and ruled by the Reds, the elite class that enjoys absolute power and luxury. The novel traces Darrow’s transformation from a submissive laborer to a revolutionary figure who infiltrates the upper class with the goal of dismantling the system from within. This research centers on how social domination is depicted and maintained in *Red Rising*, using Marxist theory as the primary analytical lens. While the novel has gained international acclaim and inspired numerous discussions among fans and literary critics, academic engagement—especially from Indonesian scholars—remains limited. Previous studies of *Red Rising* have tended to focus on its world-building, character development, or political allegory, often without a firm theoretical grounding. For instance, some research has explored the novel’s political themes broadly, but without engaging directly with class theory or concepts such as ideology and alienation. Others have focused on the genre aspects, such as dystopian conventions or heroic archetypes, leaving a significant gap in studies that apply Marxist literary criticism to the text.

This gap is particularly important given the contemporary relevance of the issues addressed in *Red Rising*. In an age of growing income inequality, systemic injustice, and ideological manipulation through media and technology, the novel resonates strongly with modern audiences. Its portrayal of class oppression, ideological deception, and grassroots resistance invites readers to reflect on their own social conditions and the

structures that govern them. Thus, analyzing this novel through Marxist theory does not only contribute to literary scholarship but also to broader socio-political awareness.

The present study seeks to fill the identified gap by offering a focused and theoretically grounded analysis of *Red Rising*. Specifically, this study will examine three interrelated aspects: (1) how the novel represents the structure of social class through its color-based caste system; (2) how the ruling class maintains domination through ideology, hegemony, and coercion; and (3) how class conflict and revolutionary resistance are portrayed through the journey of Darrow. These areas of inquiry are not only theoretically significant but also practically relevant, as they reflect ongoing social struggles across different contexts and eras.

By situating this study within Marxist theory and incorporating Gramsci's insights on hegemony, the research aims to offer a critical reading of *Red Rising* that emphasizes the role of literature in exposing social contradictions and envisioning pathways toward liberation. The analysis will also demonstrate how science fiction, as a genre, can serve as a powerful vehicle for socio-political critique. In doing so, this article aspires to contribute both to the field of English literary studies and to the broader discourse on social justice.

This study aims to provide a critical analysis of *Red Rising* by Pierce Brown through the lens of Marxist theory, focusing on class structure, ideological domination, and resistance. By engaging with theoretical concepts and applying them to literary narrative, the research will contribute to a deeper understanding of how literature can reflect and critique social inequalities. The findings of this study are expected to enrich the academic discourse on literary Marxism and offer meaningful insights into the dynamics of power, ideology, and resistance in both fictional and real-world contexts.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Marxist literary theory has long served as a powerful analytical tool in literary studies, offering a framework for understanding how texts reflect and critique the structures of class, power, and ideology within society. Developed by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels in the 19th century, Marxism centers on the idea that material conditions and economic relations form the basis of social structure. One of its key assertions is that human history is fundamentally a history of class struggle between the bourgeoisie, who control the means of production, and the proletariat, who are subject to exploitation (Marx & Engels, 1973). This core premise has made Marxist theory particularly relevant for analyzing literary texts that portray social injustice, oppression, and rebellion.

- In the context of literary criticism, Marxism examines how literature is shaped by, and contributes to, class ideology. According to Eagleton (1976), literature is not merely a passive reflection of social reality but also an active ideological force that can reinforce or resist dominant power structures. For instance, a text may depict class hierarchy and exploitation in ways that either naturalize these conditions or challenge

them by highlighting resistance and consciousness. This dual potential makes Marxist criticism especially valuable in analyzing dystopian or speculative fiction, where imagined societies often mirror and exaggerate real-world class dynamics.

- A central concept in Marxist thought is ideology—a set of ideas used by the ruling class to maintain dominance. Marx (1992) emphasizes that ideology masks the real conditions of exploitation by presenting the interests of the dominant class as universal truths. Althusser (1971) further elaborates that ideology operates through institutions such as education, religion, and literature, shaping individuals' perceptions and behaviors in ways that sustain existing power relations. From this perspective, literature becomes a medium through which ideology is reproduced or contested. Antonio Gramsci's notion of hegemony enriches this analysis by explaining how the ruling class secures consent from subordinate classes through cultural and intellectual leadership, rather than through force alone. Hegemony renders the worldview of the dominant class as “common sense,” effectively marginalizing or delegitimizing alternative perspectives.
- Another important Marxist concept is alienation, which refers to the estrangement of individuals from their labor, their products, their fellow humans, and even from their own essence under capitalism (Marx, 1992). In literary narratives, alienation often appears as a theme in characters who feel disconnected from their work or community, mirroring the psychological and social consequences of exploitation. The concept is particularly resonant in dystopian fiction, where protagonists are frequently portrayed as cogs in oppressive systems, striving to reclaim agency and identity.
- In addition to thematic analysis, Marxist literary criticism also emphasizes the structural dimensions of texts. Genetic structuralism, a theory developed by Lucien Goldmann, asserts that literary structures are expressions of a collective consciousness, or “world vision,” associated with specific social classes (Goldmann, 1977). This approach focuses on the dynamic relationship between the form of a literary work—its characters, plot, setting, and conflict—and the historical social structures that inform it. Goldmann posits that literature is both a product and a reflection of socio-historical forces, and must be understood in relation to the evolving collective subject it represents.

METHOD

This study employs a qualitative descriptive research design grounded in literary analysis. The primary purpose is to investigate the representation of class conflict, social domination, and ideological constructs in *Red Rising* (2014), a dystopian science fiction novel by Pierce Brown. The approach adopted in this study is Marxist literary criticism, which is supported by an intrinsic structural analysis focusing on character, plot, and setting. This combination enables a thorough examination of how social inequality and resistance are embedded within the novel's narrative structure. The population of this research is the narrative content of *Red Rising*, specifically the literary elements that reflect socio-economic dynamics such as class hierarchy, oppression, and resistance. The

sample is purposively selected from specific narrative segments, character dialogues, and plot developments that are closely related to the study's focus. These samples are chosen based on their relevance to Marxist concepts such as proletarian struggle, bourgeois domination, class ideology, and false consciousness. The data collection technique involves close reading of the entire novel to gain an in-depth understanding of its storylines, character arcs, and socio-political setting. Relevant excerpts are identified, marked, and categorized as raw data. These excerpts include descriptive passages, character monologues, and scenes that directly or symbolically illustrate class struggle and ideological imposition. The researcher also made analytical notes while reading, which serve as preliminary interpretations and assist in organizing the data thematically. Data analysis is conducted through several stages. First, the selected narrative data are examined using Marxist theoretical frameworks to identify how economic structures and class interests are represented in the text. Second, the data are categorized based on intrinsic elements of literature: character development (especially the protagonist's transformation), plot events (revolts, oppression, and systemic injustice), and setting (social structure, environment, and institutional power). Finally, the findings are interpreted and synthesized to explain how the text critiques dominant ideologies and exposes mechanisms of social control and resistance. The analysis is presented thematically in the discussion section of the article.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

A. How is the structure of social class represented in Pierce Brown's novel *Red Rising*

In Pierce Brown's science fiction world *Red Rising*, society is built upon a rigid and hierarchical foundation: a color-based caste system known as "Colors." This system is not merely a social division, but a totalitarian power structure that dictates each individual's role, status, and life value based on their predetermined birth color. Within a Marxist framework, this system represents an extreme division of social classes, where the Gold class can be understood as the ruling bourgeoisie, while the Red class represents the most oppressed proletariat. At the apex of the social hierarchy stands the Gold class, considered the highest form of human evolution. They are the rulers, supreme administrators, and inheritors of absolute power in society. The novel states.

You and I are Gold. We are the end of the evolutionary line. We tower above the flesh heap of man, shepherding the lesser Colors. You have inherited this legacy," he pauses, studying faces in the assembly. "But it is not free. "Power must be claimed. Wealth won. Rule, dominion, empire purchased with blood. You scarless children deserve nothing. You do not know pain. You do not know what your forefathers sacrificed to place you on these heights (Brown, 2014:9).

Directly beneath the Golds are the White class, who serve as judges, academics, and philosophers. They are responsible for education, law, and morality within society. The White's role as regulators of legal order and values reflects the intellectual position of the

bourgeoisie within the Marxist superstructure, where they not only enforce laws but also shape societal thought and perception. Below the Whites are the Silver class, who manage finance and logistics. The Silver's role is central to the functioning of the Society's economic system and can be compared to technocrats or financial elites in capitalist societies.

Next are the Coppers, the administrative class who run the bureaucracy. In Marxism, Coppers can be positioned as part of the educated working class tasked with sustaining the bourgeois system from within, through administrative and managerial work. Meanwhile, Blues serve as space navigators and operators of high-tech transport systems. Together with the Greens, who are described as technicians and digital system experts they form the technological backbone of Society. Despite their crucial role, they lack control over the system and remain subordinate to the castes above them. Then there are the Yellows, who are scientists and medical personnel. They function in the fields of health and research. In the context of modern society, they can be equated with professionals in biology, medicine, and laboratories—playing a vital role but remaining structurally subordinate. Additionally, there are the Green and Pink castes. Greens

B. How is social domination maintained and perpetuated by the ruling class in Pierce Brown's *Red Rising*

In Pierce Brown's *Red Rising* universe, the exploitation and material conditions of the proletariat, represented by the Red caste, form the cornerstone of social oppression. Their lives are systematically reduced to mere instruments of production, with their labor and resources fully utilized for the luxury and survival of the upper castes, especially the Golds. The living and working conditions of the Reds, particularly the helium-3 miners beneath the surface of Mars, are explicitly depicted as harsh, dangerous, and filled with suffering. From the beginning of the narrative, readers are presented with a direct illustration of the brutal reality faced by Darrow as a Helldiver. Their work attire, the frysuit symbolizes the oppression inherent in their existence.

I smell my own stink inside my frysuit. The suit is some kind of nanoplastic and is hot as its name suggests. It insulates me toe to head. Nothing gets in. Nothing gets out. Especially not the heat. Worst part is you can't wipe the sweat from your eyes. Bloodydamn stings as it goes through the headband to puddle at the heels. Not to mention the stink when you piss. Which you always do. Gotta take in a load of water through the drinktube. I guess you could be fit with a catheter. We choose the stink (Brown, 2014:11). The dominance of the Gold class in *Red Rising* is manifested not only in their hierarchical position as the highest caste but also in the comprehensive mechanisms they employ to maintain absolute power and control over the entire society. This analysis will explore the various methods used by the Golds, including the use of physical violence, political and ideological manipulation, and control over information and technology, all of which support the luxurious lifestyle and privileges they enjoy as owners of the means of production and holders of power. This control is integral and multi-layered, designed to ensure total obedience from the lower castes while solidifying the Golds' claim of superiority as the end of the evolutionary line. One of the main pillars of Gold dominance

is the claim of genetic and evolutionary superiority that they instill through a strong ideology.

We tower above the flesh heap of man, shepherding the lesser Colors. You have inherited this legacy," he pauses, studying faces in the assembly. "But it is not free. Power must be claimed. Wealth won. Rule, dominion, empire purchased with blood. You scarless children deserve nothing (Brown, 2014:9).

Social domination in the Gold-governed society in the novel *Red Rising* is maintained not only through physical force and military control but also significantly through the instrument of ideology. This ideology is carefully designed to justify the existing hierarchy, instill a sense of obedience, and obscure the reality of exploitation experienced by the lower classes. Thus, ideology functions as a crucial mechanism in perpetuating Gold power and ensuring the stability of an unequal social order. One of the main pillars of Gold ideology is the creation of myths and narratives that glorify the purpose of planetary colonization and the crucial role of the Golds in leading human expansion. This narrative is consistently disseminated through various channels, especially the mass media called HC (Holocore). This propaganda aims not only to demonize rebel groups but also to instill a sense of pride and purpose in those who are exploited, especially the Reds.

C. How are class conflict and resistance against the social system portrayed through the journey of the main character, Darrow

At the beginning of the *Red Rising* novel, the character Darrow is presented as an individual trapped in a rigid system of social domination, where he experiences various forms of profound alienation. As a Red, his status in the Gold society's hierarchy places him at the very bottom, a condition that systematically cuts him off from essential aspects of his humanity. An analysis of Darrow's experiences shows how alienation not only affects his physical condition but also his psychological and social realms, forming a false consciousness that binds him to the oppressive order.

Darrow's alienation from the product of his labor is a fundamental aspect of his exploited condition. As a Helldiver, his primary task is to mine helium-3 beneath the surface of Mars, a physically arduous and dangerous process. However, the fruit of his hard work, helium-3, never belongs to him or benefits his community. Instead, this vital mineral is entirely controlled and used by the Golds for terraforming other planets, which ultimately benefits the Golds themselves. This reality creates a chasm between Darrow as a worker and the real value of the product he produces, a classic characteristic of alienation from the product. Furthermore, Darrow's alienation from his work process is also very evident. The harsh and inhumane working environment highlights how mining is no longer an expression of human creativity or skill but a monotonous and painful routine.

My existence is vibration, the echo of my own breath, and heat so thick and noxious it feels like I'm swaddled in a heavy quilt of hot piss. A new river of sweat breaks through the scarlet sweatband tied around my forehead and slips into my eyes, burning them till they're as red as my rusty hair. I used to reach and try to wipe the sweat away, only to

scratch futilely at the faceplate of my frysuit. I still want to. Even after three years, the tickle and sting of the sweat is a raw misery (Brown, 2014:12).

After experiencing a dramatic transformation of class consciousness following Eo's death, Darrow makes a crucial decision to infiltrate the world of the Golds, a revolutionary step designed to dismantle the system of domination from within. This decision marks a fundamental shift from a passive existence as a victim of alienation to an active role as an agent of change. However, this infiltration process involves not only physical alteration but also demands Darrow to internalize the culture, values, and worldview of his oppressors, a challenging adaptation fraught with deep internal conflict. The first step in Darrow's infiltration mission is a radical physical transformation. This transformation is not merely a cosmetic operation but a total restructuring of Darrow's biological identity to conform to Gold physical standards. This process is excruciatingly painful, to the point where Darrow feels as though he died twice.

My life becomes agony. My Sigils are attached to the metacarpus in each hand. Mickey removes the old Red Sigils and cultivates new skin and bone over the wounds. Then he sets to installing a stolen subdermal datachip into my frontal lobe. I am told the trauma killed me and they had to restart my heart. I've died twice then (Brown, 2014:81).

After undergoing a dramatic physical transformation and partial internalization of the Gold world, Darrow embarks on a critical phase of his mission: initiating strategic resistance and mobilizing class struggle from within the Gold power structure. This phase not only involves utilizing Darrow's intelligence and physical strength but also his ability to exploit the weaknesses of the Gold system and forge unexpected alliances. The conflicts Darrow creates and faces at the Institute become a microcosm of the larger class struggle he envisions.

One of the crucial initial steps in Darrow's resistance strategy is Dancer's revelation of the truth about Gold society and the purpose of Darrow's infiltration. Dancer not only informs Darrow about the lies propagated by Society but also shows how the Sons of Ares have begun to counteract Gold information control.

You should know that your wife didn't die in vain, Darrow. The Greens who help us hijacked the broadcast. We hacked in and played the true version over every HC on our planet. The planet, the clans of the hundred thousand mining colonies and those in the cities, have heard your wife's song (Brown, 2014:63).

Darrow's transformative journey from an alienated Red miner to a revolutionary leader not only depicts individual evolution but also positions him as a powerful symbol of proletarian revolution in the *Red Rising* narrative. Through his struggle, the novel conveys a profound message about the potential for radical social change and the possibility of overthrowing oppressive systems. Darrow, with his courage and intelligence, embodies hope for the oppressed and becomes the personification of the inevitable class struggle. A crucial moment that solidifies Darrow as a symbol of proletarian resistance is the death of his wife, Eo. Her final cry to "break the chains" is not merely an act of individual defiance but a resonant declaration, a call for collective freedom.

CONCLUSION

This study explores the representation of social class structure, class conflict, and resistance within Pierce Brown's *Red Rising*, employing a Marxist theoretical framework. The analysis reveals that the novel constructs a rigid, hierarchical social order based on a color-coded caste system, mirroring the Marxist division between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat. The Golds embody the ruling class with absolute control over society, supported by intermediary castes that function to maintain this domination. At the base of this social pyramid, the Reds serve as the most exploited proletariat, subjected to dehumanizing labor, systemic oppression, and ideological manipulation that denies them awareness of their own subjugation.

The novel further portrays class conflict and resistance through the transformation of the protagonist, Darrow. His journey from false consciousness to revolutionary awareness encapsulates the awakening of class consciousness, a key Marxist concept. After personal tragedy dismantles his belief in the dominant ideology, Darrow's infiltration of the Gold elite and subsequent rebellion represents a strategic form of class resistance that challenges systemic oppression from within.

These findings highlight the novel's critical engagement with class struggle, demonstrating how literature can serve as a site of ideological critique and revolutionary potential. Based on the results, future research may explore intersections between class and other forms of social identity such as race or gender within dystopian literature. Practically, educators may also use such texts to foster critical awareness among students about power structures in both fictional and real-world contexts.

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