



Marxism and Race: An Intersectional Perspective in Literary Theory

¹S. Subash, ²Dr. T. S. Ramesh,

¹PhD Scholar, ²Associate Professor,

¹Department of English,

¹National College Autonomous, Trichy, India

Abstract: This paper revisits Marxist literary theory through the lens of intersectionality, proposing a critical synthesis that accounts for the complex interplay between class, race, and ideology in cultural production. While classical Marxist frameworks have provided foundational insights into the role of economic structures in shaping literature, their tendency to prioritize class as the singular axis of oppression often marginalizes the constitutive roles of race, gender, and colonial history. Intersectional theory—particularly as developed by Black feminist thinkers and critical race theorists—demonstrates that systems of power are not additive but interwoven. This paper argues that racial formations are not merely superstructural phenomena but are materially embedded within the logics of capitalist production itself, as theorized by Cedric Robinson’s concept of racial capitalism. Additionally, it engages with Althusser’s notion of ideology and rethinks ideological state apparatuses through the racialized lens of cultural hegemony. By synthesizing Marxist and intersectional insights, this paper outlines a theoretical framework that situates literature within a matrix of intersecting oppressions. It proposes a shift away from economic reductionism toward a more relational materialism—one that sees race, class, and ideology as co-constitutive forces in both the production and reception of literary texts.

keywords: *Racial Capitalism, Marxist Literary Theory, Intersectionality, Ideology, Class, Race Analysis*

INTRODUCTION

Theoretical engagements with race and class have too often treated them as distinct or competing frameworks, undermining the possibility of a unified critique of social inequality. As Reed (2013) argues, Marxism provides a crucial lens through which race and racism can be demystified, treating them not as eternal truths but as historically specific ideologies anchored in capitalist relations of production. This demystification redirects attention away from essentialist notions of racial identity toward their functional role in legitimizing and stabilizing economic hierarchies. By foregrounding the ideological utility of race, Reed reframes it as a tool of social control, rather than as an inherent or transhistorical category. Gimenez (2001) echoes this critique by noting that race, gender, and class are not simply additive or co-equal systems of oppression, but are structured through historically specific capitalist social formations. This shifts the discussion from surface-level experiences of identity to the underlying material processes that generate those identities in the first place. For Gimenez, class is not merely another axis of oppression but the structural force that shapes and mediates all others. Consequently, she contends that attempts to understand race and gender without reference to class devolve into descriptive catalogues of experience rather than explanatory analyses of power. Taken together, these perspectives demand a rethinking of literary theory’s analytic categories. Rather than isolating race as a self-contained system, a Marxist-intersectional approach insists on interpreting it in relation to class struggle, ideological reproduction, and the capitalist mode of production.

Literature Review and Research Gap:

The intersection of Marxist literary theory and race studies has increasingly turned toward more integrative frameworks that avoid economic reductionism. Sites (2025) argues that critical race theories have replicated tensions present in early Marxist thought by opposing the essentialist treatment of race while still situating it within the operations of capitalism. This observation reveals a growing consensus that the failures of classical Marxism to account for race do not require abandoning its tools but rather modifying them to accommodate the historical contingency of racial categories. This shift away from determinism is especially relevant to recent attempts to ground race in the dynamics of labor under capitalism. De Genova (2023) advances this discourse by suggesting that Blackness itself represents the extreme form of labor’s subordination in capitalist society, thus necessitating a racial theory of labor. The emphasis on slavery as foundational to global capital accumulation reframes racial identity as not only ideological but also structurally embedded in the historical development of capitalism. This argument enriches Marxist theory by deepening its understanding of labor relations through the lens of racial formation. Such formulations resonate with Cedric Robinson’s theory of racial capitalism, which has become central to contemporary Marxist race critiques. Singh (2024) integrates Robinson’s thought

with Stuart Hall's flexible Marxism to highlight how race and class are co-constitutive, historically embedded categories. The historical emphasis is crucial here: Singh's work asserts that these categories are not static variables but products of particular moments in the evolution of capitalist societies. This approach aligns with cultural materialist methods that insist on temporality and specificity in ideological analysis.

While Singh emphasizes co-constitution, other scholars highlight the political stakes in how race is conceptualized. Walton (2021) interrogates the incorporation of 'White supremacy' into Marxist discourse, showing how tensions emerge when racism is treated either as a structural element of capitalism or as an autonomous ideological system. Walton's critique underscores a central dilemma in Marxist race theory: the risk of either subordinating race to class or treating it as analytically separate, thus diluting Marxism's explanatory power. His work illustrates the need for balance—a nonreductive materialism that can articulate how ideological domination operates in tandem with material exploitation. This call for balance is further echoed in literary studies, particularly through intersectional analyses of narrative and character. Maha (2025) demonstrates how Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* maps intersectionality onto a landscape of economic marginalization and racialized beauty standards. Maha's reading of Pecola Breedlove as a victim of compounded forms of oppression—race, class, and gender—illustrates the psychic toll of capitalist racial ideologies. As Maha (2025) notes, "Pecola's desire for blue eyes is a potent metaphor for her internalized racism and the hegemony of social beauty standards that reify whiteness." The metaphor serves not just as a literary device, but as a material symptom of the ideological structures that govern her world. Pecola's predicament is not an isolated psychological issue but a product of systemic racial capitalism, where ideologies of beauty intersect with exploitative class positions. Maha's study thus bridges the theoretical and literary, offering a practical application of the frameworks advanced by Sites (2025), Singh (2024), and De Genova (2023). It shows how literature becomes a site of ideological struggle, where race, gender, and class are internalized and contested simultaneously. The intersectional approach in *The Bluest Eye* reinforces the necessity of reading racial experience through a Marxist lens that accounts for the broader system of production and reproduction.

Gimenez (2001) provides a strong theoretical foundation for such intersectional readings by arguing that class is the underlying power that structures all social identities, including race and gender. According to her, the Race, Gender & Class (RGC) framework, while useful for mapping intersecting oppressions, lacks a macro-theoretical grounding unless it is tethered to Marxist historical materialism. She cautions against the flattening of class, race, and gender into equivalent categories, asserting that only Marxism can provide the necessary tools for understanding their differential roles in systems of domination. This assertion aligns with the critiques of Sites and Walton, who argue that without a clear anchoring in material relations, race theory risks becoming idealist or purely experiential. Moreover, Gimenez challenges the popular trend of emphasizing "intersectionality" as a descriptive rather than explanatory framework. She observes that RGC studies too often fall into a pattern of documenting identities without linking them to their structural conditions of possibility. This critique supports Singh's (2024) historical-materialist reading of racial capitalism and reinforces the idea that intersectionality must be embedded within a broader critique of political economy. Without such a grounding, there is a risk of displacing material analysis in favor of individual experience, thus undermining the emancipatory goals of radical critique. Taken together, these scholars demonstrate a shared urgency in bridging the insights of Marxist theory with the lived realities of racialized subjects. Whether through theoretical refinement (Sites, Singh, Walton), historical reconceptualization (De Genova), or literary illustration (Maha), the field is moving toward a more dialectical understanding of race and class. This convergence not only revitalizes Marxist literary criticism but also expands the possibilities for interpreting literature as a terrain of ideological contestation and historical reflection.

Despite the growing convergence between Marxist theory and intersectional analysis, a significant research gap remains in how literary theory systematically integrates these approaches without collapsing race into class or treating them as wholly autonomous. While thinkers like Singh (2024) and Reed (2013) advocate for the co-constitution of race and class, most studies either remain on a theoretical level or offer isolated literary analyses without embedding them into a unified critical framework. For instance, Maha (2025) provides a compelling reading of *The Bluest Eye*, but the broader theoretical implications are underexplored. Moreover, intersectionality is often deployed descriptively in literary scholarship, without a sustained materialist critique of how capitalist structures reproduce racial hierarchies. Gimenez (2001) warns that without grounding intersectionality in class analysis, studies risk becoming empirically rich but theoretically weak. This paper addresses that gap by offering a theoretical synthesis grounded in historical materialism, emphasizing race as both an ideological construct and a material condition shaped by capitalism. It contributes to existing scholarship by proposing a nonreductive Marxist framework that centers race within class struggle, offering a toolset for future literary analysis that neither fetishizes identity nor flattens it into economic abstraction.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Theoretical framework

This paper employs a theoretical and conceptual methodology grounded in historical materialism, drawing primarily from Marxist literary theory, critical race theory, and intersectional feminist thought. Rather than conducting empirical analysis or close textual readings of specific literary works, the focus here is on synthesizing existing theoretical frameworks to develop a robust conceptual model that accounts for the co-constitution of race and class under capitalism. The method is fundamentally dialectical, seeking to reveal the interrelations between ideological formations (such as race) and the material conditions that shape and sustain them. The analysis engages in critical discourse analysis of foundational and contemporary theoretical texts, including works by Cedric Robinson, Adolph Reed Jr., Martha Gimenez, and others who have contributed to Marxist critiques of race. These texts are not treated as static authorities but as historically situated arguments that reflect ongoing tensions in the theorization of race and class. Concepts such as racial capitalism, ideological state apparatuses, and social reproduction are examined across these discourses to assess their explanatory value and internal contradictions. Furthermore, the paper employs a meta-theoretical approach, comparing how race, class, and identity are conceptualized across multiple paradigms. This comparative strategy enables the identification of theoretical blind spots—particularly in intersectional and race-based frameworks that lack material grounding, as well as in Marxist analyses that minimize the ideological function of race. The goal of this methodology is not to propose a new "grand theory," but to clarify and refine existing categories of analysis. Through this method, the paper develops a critical toolkit for reading literary texts and social

phenomena in ways that neither reduce race to class nor treat race as a free-floating abstraction unmoored from political economy.

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Contemporary discussions on race and capitalism increasingly reveal that racial oppression cannot be analyzed independently of capitalist structures, nor can capitalism be understood without addressing its foundational reliance on racial hierarchies. As Singh (2024) notes, the interplay between race and class is historically situated and co-constitutive, emerging as a core mechanism through which capitalism sustains itself. This insight underscores the necessity of abandoning single-axis approaches in favor of frameworks that recognize race not as an incidental feature of capitalism, but as one of its primary organizing logics. This entwinement becomes especially clear when we examine how dispossession, rather than wage exploitation alone, functions as a primary modality of racial capitalism. Perry (2025) has shown that Black women across Latin America have led grassroots movements against land evictions and militarized urban redevelopment, articulating resistance from positions historically excluded from both economic ownership and political representation. Her analysis reveals that racial capitalism operates not just through market exclusion but through the violent reorganization of space, enforced by state power, to sustain capitalist accumulation. Here, race and class do not merely intersect—they are co-productive of the very material landscape of power and dispossession. Moreover, Sites (2025) challenges the assumption that critical race theory and Marxism are necessarily at odds, proposing a nonreductive Marxism that views race as a flexible construct produced within capitalist social formations. This formulation disrupts deterministic narratives and invites us to theorize race as a historically contingent but materially enforced structure of control. It also suggests that critical race theorists can contribute valuable insights to Marxist theory by exposing the ideological and affective dimensions through which racial difference becomes functional for capital.

The persistence of anti-Black violence under systems of liberal governance also complicates traditional narratives of progress and democratic inclusion. Connolly (2025) highlights how American liberalism has operated as a racialized technology of management, where rights and protections are granted not as universal entitlements but as contingent privileges mediated by whiteness. Connolly's work exposes the ideological duplicity of liberalism, which cloaks its exclusions under the guise of neutrality and individualism. His critique aligns with Reed's (2013) insistence that racial ideologies are not autonomous forces but tools forged within capitalist political economies to manage and discipline labor. Financialization—the turn from industrial capitalism to finance-driven accumulation—has not erased racial hierarchies but rather deepened them through new modalities of exclusion and banishment. De Genova (2023) observes that Blackness has historically signified the ultimate condition of labor's subordination, and thus any transformation in capitalism must be analyzed in terms of how it reconfigures the racial logic of labor. The move toward financialized economies, marked by housing foreclosures, evictions, and predatory lending, has disproportionately targeted communities of color, showing that capitalism's racial infrastructure is as enduring as it is adaptable. This is consistent with Maha's (2025) analysis of *The Bluest Eye*, where Pecola's desire for blue eyes stands as a metaphor for the internalization of whiteness as a hegemonic norm. Maha's reading points to the deep psychological toll of racial capitalism, which operates not only through external domination but also through the formation of subjectivity. In this regard, ideology plays a central role, reinforcing economic and racial domination through cultural norms, beauty standards, and internalized inferiority—hallmarks of Althusserian ideological state apparatuses at work.

The question of ideology and reproduction is also addressed by Gimenez (2001), who warns against treating race, gender, and class as equivalent categories. Instead, she posits class as the structural force that shapes and mediates all others, without denying the real and differential experiences of racialized and gendered oppression. This theoretical orientation helps clarify the distinction between descriptive intersectionality and explanatory historical materialism, reinforcing the need to anchor race and gender analyses in materialist critiques of capitalist reproduction. What emerges from this synthesis is a view of capitalism not as a neutral economic system but as a racialized, gendered, and imperial formation. Lumba (2025) offers a compelling account of how imperial sovereignty in the Philippines was legitimated through racialized discourses on monetary stability and financial control, showing that even the most "technical" domains of capitalist expansion—currency, trade, taxation—are thoroughly embedded in colonial logics of race and domination. His analysis illustrates how colonial anxieties over Chinese and Filipino economic agency reveal the racial foundations of market regulation, transforming ordinary economic practices into spectacles of racial threat and imperial insecurity. Similarly, Keisha-Khan Perry (2025) demonstrates how urban redevelopment in Brazil is both a racial and gendered process of displacement, targeting Black women under the guise of modernization. Her work illuminates the invisibilized labor of poor Black women as central to the reproduction of life and resistance under racial capitalism. These women, often on the margins of both wage labor and political discourse, have organized some of the most sustained critiques of capitalist redevelopment. Their struggles highlight how the margins of capitalist society are not merely sites of neglect but also of radical possibility and transformative resistance.

This grassroots resistance aligns with Connolly's assertion that even among Black elites, relationships with white liberalism were strategic, contingent, and often complicit in maintaining racial capitalism's underlying logics. His work challenges simplistic binaries between collaboration and resistance, revealing instead a nuanced terrain of negotiation, patronage, and ideological entrapment. Such dynamics mirror broader critiques of multicultural neoliberalism, where inclusion often serves to legitimize exclusionary systems rather than dismantle them. At the same time, critiques of settler colonialism and imperialism further expand our understanding of capitalism as a global racial order. Lumba (2025) and Hudson (2025) argue that race is not merely a domestic construct but a transnational system of classification and governance that organizes access to land, labor, and life across global geographies. Settler colonialism, rather than being a distinct system, functions as one of many modalities through which capital displaces and dominates, with varying expressions across time and place. This resonates with the insights of Singh (2024), who foregrounds the historical specificity of racial formations, emphasizing that any adequate theory of race under capitalism must be attentive to geography, temporality, and the evolving forms of imperial power. The implications for literary theory are profound. If literature reflects and refracts ideological structures, then a Marxist-intersectional approach must attend not only to what texts say but to how they reproduce, resist, or reconfigure the systems of value and meaning shaped by racial capitalism. Rather than isolating race or class as discrete variables, literary scholars must examine the formal and thematic ways in which texts

participate in the ideological reproduction of capitalist society. This includes how narratives normalize dispossession, romanticize mobility, or obscure the structural conditions of inequality. Ultimately, what this body of work reveals is that race and class are not parallel tracks but deeply entangled terrains. As Walton (2021) argues, the tensions between Critical Race Theory and Marxism can only be resolved through a dialectical approach that recognizes the necessity of both economic structure and racial ideology in shaping social life. In this spirit, the present paper contributes to a growing body of scholarship committed to theorizing race not as identity, but as structure; not as culture alone, but as capital's logic of differentiation. By foregrounding the perspectives of those historically placed at the margins—women of color, displaced tenants, colonized populations—this paper reiterates the argument advanced by Perry (2025) that the struggle for land, dignity, and survival is also a struggle over epistemology and political imagination. It is only by centering these lived experiences that we can arrive at a theory adequate to the task of explaining—and ultimately dismantling—the persistent nexus of race and capital.

REFERENCES

- [1] De Genova, N. 2023. A racial theory of labour: Racial capitalism from colonial slavery to postcolonial migration. *Historical Materialism*, 1–33. <https://doi.org/10.1163/1569206x-bja10018>.
- [2] Gimenez, M. E. 2018. Marxism and class, gender and race: Rethinking the trilogy. In *Marx, Women, and Capitalist Social Reproduction* (pp. 82–93). BRILL.
- [3] Maha, S. 2025. The Cost of Freedom: Intersectionality and Socioeconomic Inequality in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*. *International Journal of Humanities Science Innovations and Management Studies*, 1(2): 1–8.
- [4] Reed, A., Jr. 2013. Marx, race, and neoliberalism. *New Labor Forum*, 22(1): 49–57. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1095796012471637>.
- [5] Singh, N. P. 2024. Le Marxisme noir et les antinomies du capitalisme racial. *L'Esprit Créateur*, 64(1): 53–70. <https://doi.org/10.1353/esp.2024.a929204>.
- [6] Sites, W. 2025. Critical race theory, Marxism, and the problem of ideology. *Sociological Theory*, 43(1): 27–51. <https://doi.org/10.1177/07352751241312247>.
- [7] Walton, S. 2021. A prolegomenon to a critical race theoretical Marxism. *Power and Education*, 13(3): 116–133. <https://doi.org/10.1177/17577438211020769>.

