



The Representation Of Class Struggles In Working- Class British Women's Fiction A Study Of Pat Barker's Union Street And Andrea Levy's Small Island

Baisakhi Adhikary, Dr. Jayatee Bhattacharya

Student, Associate Professor

Amity Institute of English Studies and Research

Amity University, Uttar Pradesh, India

Abstract

This research investigates class struggles in British working-class women's fiction through an analysis of Pat Barker's *Union Street* (1982) and Andrea Levy's *Small Island* (2004). Barker brings out gendered class struggles in industrial England, and Levy analyses racialized class struggles in post-WWII Britain. This research, applying Marxist, feminist, and postcolonial theories, examines how both writers critique patriarchy, capitalism, and colonialism in fiction. The research highlights literature's ability to promote empathy and sensitivity to socio-economic inequalities, pointing to its long-lasting potential to subvert mainstream narratives, give voice to marginalized communities, and provoke critical reflection on class, gender, and race.

Introduction

Class conflicts have deeply influenced British society, impacting individual lives and communities. Fiction has been a way of recording and critiquing these conflicts, especially through the works of working-class British women writers, who offer a detailed representation of socio-economic inequality. This research analyses Pat Barker's *Union Street* (1982) and Andrea Levy's *Small Island* (2004) to discuss how class conflicts intersect with gender, race, and historical transformation.

Barker's *Union Street* presents a bleak picture of working-class women in a 1970s northern English industrial town. Through intertwining narratives, she emphasizes the effects of poverty, domestic violence, and social exclusion, showing how gender exacerbates class-based struggles. Levy's *Small Island*, located in post-World War II Britain, moves on to Jamaican immigrants and white working-class Britons to expose how class and race become entangled in a strict social hierarchy. Both writers condemn systematic inequalities, and they present marginalized communities as having resilience, undermining patriarchal, capitalist, and colonial frameworks.

Despite their different settings, *Union Street* and *Small Island* share a commitment to amplifying marginalized voices. They challenge dominant narratives by presenting the everyday struggles of

working-class individuals and encouraging readers to question the roots of social injustice.

Through the lenses of Marxist, feminist, and postcolonial theory, this research explores the representation of class struggles and social critique in Barker and Levy. Revisiting these novels at a moment when socio-economic inequality is increasing reaffirms the timelessness of class struggles and literature's power to create consciousness and effect social transformation.

Class Struggle in British Society

Class struggle has been a dominant theme in British literature, reflecting the nation's economic disparities and power dynamics. Literature has been used since the Industrial Revolution to critique structural disparities and reflect the lived experience of the working class. British fiction provides a glimpse into the intersections of economic poverty and gender and race, informing experiences of oppression and survival. The industrial novel of the 19th century, represented in Elizabeth Gaskell's *North and South* and Charles Dickens's *Hard Times*, exposed exploitation of labor, factory suffering, and class struggle. The novels depicted the suffering of working-class people before middle- and

upper-class readers and generated awareness and sympathy. The 20th century also saw working-class writers like George Orwell (*The Road to Wigan Pier*) and D.H. Lawrence (*Sons and Lovers*) offering personal and intimate experiences of working-class life. Women writers carried on the tradition, depicting economic as well as gender suppression.

Pat Barker's *Union Street* and Andrea Levy's *Small Island* continue this tradition but add further depth to class struggles. Barker examines working-class women in an industrial town and sees the intersection of class and gender in poverty, domestic violence, and abandonment by society. Levy examines racialized class struggles and sees the lives of Jamaican immigrants and white Britons of post-WWII Britain.

Positioning *Union Street* and *Small Island* within the framework of British working-class writing, this research focuses on their particular contributions towards understanding postmodern class complexities from an intersectional perspective.

Pat Barker's Union Street: Gendered Experiences of Class Struggles

Pat Barker's *Union Street* gives a realistic and gritty portrayal of the lives of working-class women in northern England in the 1970s at a time of industrial decline and economic hardship. Through the interconnected narratives, Barker illustrates how poverty, institutional abandonment, and gender oppression define the lives across generations of women. With the closure of factories and jobs, working-class communities particularly women are further laid bare. The novel investigates how the women not only survive material poverty but also the psychological and emotional toll of being caregivers, workers, and survivors in a patriarchal world. By foregrounding the intersection of gender and class, Barker criticizes the socio-economic systems and cultural norms that intensify their misery.

The novel's structure interweaves the lives of its female characters, offering a range of perspectives on working-class womanhood. Each chapter is written from the point of view of a different woman, from young Kelly Brown, who is a victim of sexual assault, to Alice Bell, a poor, elderly, isolated widow. The interwoven narratives concentrate on individual suffering as well as collective strength, illustrating how institutional neglect creates cycles of suffering. The women, diverse as they are, are joined by the experience of resisting economic disadvantage, domestic violence, and social expectation. Barker does not depict her characters as passive victims but as women who, in spite of suffering, manage to survive and care for one another.

Solidarity and resilience are motifs that cut across the novel, but Barker does this in a realistic, unromanticized fashion. The women identify moments of strength in their relationships either in shared bereavement, quiet understanding, or acts of charity. Barker does recognize tensions in these communities

as well, though, as economic desperation can tear relationships apart and internalize oppression. While solidarity provides moments of solace, it is not a panacea; instead, it is a survival mechanism in a society that continually marginalizes working-class women.

Industrial decline is a major contributor to exacerbating the plights of these women. Factory closures and the erosion of working-class jobs lead to deep economic and social insecurity, which disproportionately affect women who rely on them for economic independence. Barker laments the effects of industrial decline, citing how the destruction of economic security creates increased domestic burdens and emotional stress. While traditional support structures break down, women have to bear the domestic responsibility and economic risk alone.

Through the emphasis of personal effects of these broader economic shifts, Barker places the human cost of policies that benefit profit over people.

Barker's unsentimental but humane narrative voice lends strength to the novel. Through fervent third-person narration, she plunges readers into the lives of her characters, asking them to sympathize intensely without betraying their dignity. Her accounts of factory life, deserted homes, and instances of misery or bravery make a rich, evocative landscape of working-class life. Barker's realism requires readers to face ugly realities of institutionalized oppression, so that her characters are not viewed as passive victims but as active agents in an unjust world.

Finally, *Union Street* is a denunciation of institutionalized oppression and an affirmation of working-class women's strength. In bringing their voices to the foreground, Barker refuses to let prevailing discourses have their way of erasing them. The novel continues to be a strong indictment of the interplay of class and gender, and the working-class women's constant struggles to be heard in a world that continues to dismiss them.

Andrea Levy's *Small Island*: The Interplay of Class and Race

Andrea Levy's *Small Island* is an exploration of the role of race and class in post-war Britain, an analysis of the Windrush generation experience. Set against the background of World War II, the novel follows the life of Jamaican immigrants Gilbert and Hortense as they face institutionalized racism, economic hardship, and cultural alienation. Joined by working-class Britons Queenie and Bernard, they face economic hardship and social dislocation. Through double narratives, Levy reveals Britain's colonial history and failure to assimilate marginalized communities, revealing the multiple layers of racial and class stratification.

Displacement is the unifying theme in *Small Island*, and it interweaves the narratives of its characters, cutting across racial and cultural boundaries. Migration to Britain is a fantasy and a letdown for Gilbert and Hortense. Gilbert's service in the war defending the "mother country" is rewarded with rejection, and Hortense's dreams are dashed on the grounds of her color. Queenie's renting out rooms to Jamaican immigrants isolates her in her own community, illustrating the manner in which social convention sanctions exclusion. Levy frames displacement both as bodily movement and as affective dislocation, and she highlights the difficulties of belonging to a hostile culture.

Prejudice and institutional discrimination drive Levy's critique of British society. Gilbert and Hortense experience racism in housing, employment, and social life, exposing deep institutional prejudices. Bernard, even though he experiences economic hardship, benefits from racial privilege. His racism is not only driven by hatred but also by individual fears, war trauma, and deep colonial ideologies, exposing how history shapes social cleavages.

Britain's colonial past is the center of *Small Island*, shaping the lives of the Jamaican characters and British assumptions about them. Levy illustrates Britain's reliance on its colonies for labor and military protection but not for equality for colonial subjects. Gilbert's military experience and Hortense's education are dismissed, revealing the self-deception of a nation that will not accept what it once dominated. In addition to institutionalized racism, Levy explores the psychological effects of colonialism, as we witness

in Hortense's early idolization of Britain and final disillusionment.

Levy's multi-voiced story gives the novel richness, allowing several perspectives to be uncovered. Gilbert's liberalism and Bernard's conservatism are pitted against each other to expose the intricacies of race and class. Hortense and Queenie's alternating narratives add to the gendered nature of displacement and economic marginalization, overturning prevailing historical accounts.

In the end, *Small Island* is a searing examination of identity, class, and race. Through the presentation of the Windrush generation's lives, Levy critiques the history of British colonialism and Britain's struggles with inclusion to this day, transforming British working-class fiction to encompass a richer history.

Comparative Analysis of Union Street and Small Island

Both Pat Barker's *Union Street* and Andrea Levy's *Small Island* map class conflict through the experiences of marginalized communities but are different in focus and approached thematically. Barker is concerned with gendered class conflict and how economic recession and industrial disaster fell most heavily on working-class women in the north of England in the 1970s. Levy, by contrast, investigates racialized class conflict and how Caribbean migrants to post-war Britain are placed in double-layered economic, and institutionally racist, social marginality.

Literarily, Barker adopts interconnected short stories that follow diverse working-class female characters, revealing their shared travails and determination. Levy deploys multi-voiced narratives to contrast and juxtapose the perspectives of Brits and Jamaicans in observing postcolonial class struggle as well as complexities in migration.

These historical settings also inform each novel's representation of class. *Union Street* laments industrial decay and patriarchal dominance, representing working-class women's restricted opportunities and institutional neglect. *Small Island*, against the backdrop of Britain's colonial past and post-war rebuilding, emphasizes the way race and class intersect to define social mobility, exclusion, and belonging.

In spite of their differences, both novels resist mainstream narratives, opening space for the silenced and marginalized in mainstream British literature and history. Both Barker and Levy's novels fall under the class and identity debate, illustrating how economic poverty, gender, and race converge to form individual and group experiences. Through their own separate but complementary descriptions, both authors reveal structural injustice while applauding the strength of the marginalized.

Literature as Social Criticism

Pat Barker's *Union Street* and Andrea Levy's *Small Island* demonstrate the ways in which literature resists social injustices, exposing the suffering of marginalized people and combating the systems that reinforce inequality. The two writers use fiction to document systemic oppression, demonstrating the ways in which patriarchal and colonial systems arrange the lives of their characters.

Barker condemns gendered class conflict, depicting working-class women in 1970s Britain trapped in the poverty cycle, domestic violence, and social abandonment. Levy, on the other hand, explores racialized economic conflict, highlighting the discrimination, marginalization, and hardship of post-war Jamaican migrants who, despite their contribution to British society, face exclusion and hardship.

Through their deeply personal narratives, both authors evoke sympathy and evoke solidarity, forcing readers to address persistent injustices. Their works remain pertinent today because class disparities, racial discrimination, and gender inequalities persist to affect economic opportunity and social mobility.

In their highly textured accounts, Barker and Levy promise us that not only can literature portray reality, but it can also induce critical thinking and social change, and their books are therefore invaluable to the class, gender, and race debate.

Conclusion

The discussion of Pat Barker's *Union Street* and Andrea Levy's *Small Island* shows how both writers apply literature to attack and reveal class struggle, demonstrating the convergence of gender, race, and economic oppression in British society. Barker's representation of working-class women in 1970s industrial England is one of the double burden of poverty and patriarchy, illustrating how women move through systemic neglect and male-dominated systems, whereas Levy's representation of post-war Jamaican immigrants in Britain is one of the racialized aspects of economic exclusion, demonstrating how colonial histories inform class hierarchies. Both books show the redemptive strength of fiction, employing realism, multi-voiced discourse, and close attention to individual characters to provoke empathy, subvert mainstream discourse, and create social consciousness. Their books are more relevant now than ever, since economic disparity, gender domination, and racial bias continue to be current in today's society. By chronicling the plight of oppressed communities and laying bare the shortcomings of systematic frameworks, Barker and Levy uphold the time-tested function of literature as a device for critique and change, reminding us that literature is not simply a reflection of reality but an agent of change. Their books make important contributions to the conversation about social justice and inequality, challenging readers to face uncomfortable realities and reconsider how class, race, and gender continue to shape access to opportunity and human dignity.

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