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Social Class Representation Within Postmodern Novels

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Abstract:

Postmodern novels dismantle traditional ideas about social class and hierarchy through fragmented narratives, irony, metafiction, and cultural deconstruction. Rather than presenting class as a rigid economic category defined by wealth or occupation, postmodern authors reinterpret it as a dynamic and unstable construct influenced by ideology, globalization, technology, and the politics of representation. The fluidity of class in postmodern fiction reflects the dissolution of grand narratives that once sustained social hierarchies. Writers such as Don DeLillo, Margaret Atwood, Salman Rushdie, and Arundhati Roy interrogate class boundaries by situating their characters within shifting global networks of capital, media, and cultural production. Through postmodern techniques—such as intertextuality, parody, non-linear structure, and unreliable narration—these authors challenge conventional depictions of economic disparity and privilege.

This paper examines how these narratives foreground the interplay between social class, race, gender, and globalization, showing that identity and status are increasingly mediated through consumer culture and symbolic capital rather than traditional economic systems. In DeLillo's *White Noise*, for instance, middle-class anxieties are refracted through media saturation and consumerism; Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* reimagines class through gendered labour and reproductive control; Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* fuses postcolonial history with class mobility; and Roy's *The God of Small Things* exposes the intersections of caste, class, and colonial legacy in postmodern India. Collectively, these works demonstrate that social class in postmodern fiction is not a static determinant but a discursive site where power, identity, and resistance continually interact. Thus, the postmodern novel becomes a cultural mirror reflecting the instability of late-capitalist societies and the erosion of clear class boundaries in an age defined by global interconnection and ideological multiplicity.

Keywords:

Social Class, Postmodernism, Capitalism, Globalization, Identity, Representation etc.

Introduction:

Social class has traditionally been viewed through the lens of economic and occupational hierarchy. However, postmodern fiction reinterprets class as a cultural and ideological construction rather than a purely material one. Postmodernism, with its scepticism toward universal truths and grand narratives, challenges the rigid social binaries that defined earlier literary periods. In postmodern novels, class identity is fragmented, shifting, and mediated by consumerism, technology, and globalization. The working class, the

elite, and the marginalized are not simply economic categories but symbols of changing social consciousness. Writers such as Don DeLillo, Margaret Atwood, Salman Rushdie, and Arundhati Roy portray how individuals navigate these unstable social realities. By analysing the representation of social class within postmodern fiction, this study seeks to understand how literature mirrors and critiques the socio-economic transformations of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries.

Review of Literature:

Fredric Jameson's *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (1991) provides a foundational critique of how postmodern culture reflects capitalist commodification. He argues that in postmodern society, social class distinctions are disguised by consumer culture and the spectacle of media.

Jean Baudrillard's *Simulacra and Simulation* (1981) introduces the concept of the "hyperreal," suggesting that representation replaces reality, erasing visible class differences. Pierre Bourdieu's *Distinction* (1984) discusses how taste and lifestyle serve as markers of class identity in modern society.

In fiction, Don DeLillo's *White Noise* (1985) examines the middle-class obsession with media and consumerism, while Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) depicts a dystopian society where class is enforced through gender and religious hierarchy. In Indian postmodern literature, Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* and Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* expose how class oppression intersects with colonial history and caste structures.

Scholars such as Terry Eagleton and David Harvey note that postmodern fiction not only critiques capitalism but also reflects its contradictions. These writers reveal that class divisions persist beneath postmodernism's surface of pluralism and choice.

Research Tools:

1. Textual Analysis: Close reading of selected postmodern novels to identify representations of social class.
2. Theoretical Framework: Postmodern and Marxist theories (Jameson, Baudrillard, Eagleton).
3. Comparative Approach: Analysis across Western and Indian postmodern novels.
4. Critical Review: Consultation of academic criticism and scholarly articles to support interpretation.

Research Methodology:

This research adopts a qualitative, analytical, and interpretive approach. The study is based on textual examination of primary sources—selected postmodern novels—and secondary sources such as literary criticism, theoretical texts, and academic journals. The focus is on narrative techniques, characterization, and symbolism used to portray social class. The methodology also employs interdisciplinary perspectives, combining postmodern theory, Marxism, and cultural studies to interpret class representation.

Objectives of the Study:

1. To examine how postmodern novels depict social class and inequality.
2. To analyse the relationship between capitalism, consumer culture, and class identity.
3. To study how postmodern techniques—fragmentation, irony, and intertextuality—reflect class instability.
4. To explore the intersection of social class with gender, race, and globalization.
5. To understand how postmodern fiction critiques contemporary economic and cultural systems.

Subject Matter:

Postmodern literature reimagines the social order by questioning traditional hierarchies and exposing the ideological foundations of class.

1. Don DeLillo's *White Noise* -

The American middle class inhabits a hyperreal landscape where daily existence is mediated by television screens, supermarket aisles, and advertising slogans. DeLillo's depiction of the Gladney family and their suburban life in the town of Blacksmith captures the psychological emptiness underlying consumer abundance. The novel's world is one where mass media and consumerism have replaced authentic human experience, turning reality into a series of commodified spectacles. DeLillo's narrative suggests that class identity in late capitalist America has become homogenized—subsumed under the illusion of choice and consumption. The distinctions that once defined social hierarchy blur as all individuals, regardless of income or intellect, are united by their dependence on consumer products and media narratives.

Through irony and parody, DeLillo critiques the superficiality of a culture obsessed with commodities and information. The supermarket, a recurring symbol in the novel, functions as both a cathedral and a microcosm of capitalist ideology—a space where identity, status, and meaning are performed through the act of buying. Jack Gladney, a professor of “Hitler Studies,” embodies the contradictions of this culture: his academic specialization in a figure of totalitarian power ironically mirrors his own submission to consumer and institutional systems. The fear of death—constantly amplified by the media and the mysterious “Airborne Toxic Event”—drives individuals toward consumption as a form of psychological security. DeLillo portrays this anxiety as the emotional core of late capitalism, where products, pharmaceuticals, and advertisements promise transcendence but deliver only distraction.

DeLillo's postmodern narrative style—marked by fragmented dialogue, parody, and banal repetition—mimics the sensory overload of media culture. Television commercials interrupt domestic life, language loses depth, and knowledge becomes surface-level simulation. The novel's humour conceals a deeper social critique: that in postmodern America, the spectacle replaces the substance, and class consciousness dissolves into a shared dependence on images. As Jean Baudrillard's theory of “simulacra” suggests, DeLillo's world operates in a realm where the copy precedes the real, and meaning is endlessly deferred. In this context, class difference becomes irrelevant because the entire social spectrum participates in the same systems of consumption and representation.

White Noise exposes the illusion of middle-class security and the spiritual impoverishment beneath material comfort. DeLillo suggests that capitalism not only commodifies goods but also emotions, relationships, and even mortality. The fear of death, a universal human concern, is transformed into a marketing opportunity—manifesting the total reach of consumer ideology. Through satire, irony, and a detached narrative tone, DeLillo dismantles the myth of progress and prosperity, revealing instead a postmodern world where the collapse of meaning mirrors the collapse of social distinction. In doing so, he redefines the concept of class as a psychological and cultural condition rather than an economic or structural one, making *White Noise* a quintessential critique of postmodern capitalist society.

2. Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* –

The dystopian Republic of Gilead functions as a meticulously engineered society where gender and class hierarchy intertwine to maintain totalitarian control. Women's identities are stripped away and redefined by their reproductive function, reducing them to instruments of state ideology. The Handmaids, Martha's, Wives, and Aunts each occupy a fixed position within this rigid hierarchy, symbolizing how social class in Gilead is both biologically and ideologically constructed. Atwood envisions a world where patriarchy, religion, and capitalism converge to commodify the female body, transforming fertility into an economic and political resource. Through this system of enforced hierarchy, Gilead transforms class into a form of bio political control, in which the state dictates not only economic and social roles but also biological destiny.

Atwood's dystopia critiques the ways in which power perpetuates inequality through ideology disguised as morality. The religious language of Gilead—drawn from distorted biblical passages—functions as propaganda that justifies oppression, echoing Michel Foucault's notion of power as embedded in discourse. The Handmaids are valued only for their reproductive capacity, while the sterile Wives, though privileged, remain bound by domestic servitude. The economy of Gilead, though seemingly anti-capitalist, operates through capitalist logic: the body becomes a commodity, and reproduction a form of labour. This

reflects Atwood's warning about late-capitalist societies where even the most intimate aspects of life—sexuality, birth, and motherhood—are subjected to state and market regulation.

Atwood uses postmodern techniques such as unreliable narration, fragmented temporality, and intertextuality to reveal how ideology manipulates memory and identity. Offred's voice, alternating between confession and resistance, exposes the instability of truth within an authoritarian regime. Her fragmented storytelling mirrors the fractured consciousness of an individual deprived of autonomy. Atwood's intertextual references—to the Bible, Puritan history, and patriarchal language—invite readers to question how cultural myths sustain social hierarchies. The erasure of women's names and identities—Offered, of glen, of warren—illustrates how language itself becomes a mechanism of class control.

Atwood's portrayal of Gilead transcends the boundaries of speculative fiction; it serves as a mirror to contemporary social anxieties. The novel reflects real-world tensions regarding reproductive rights, religious extremism, and the commodification of women's bodies in capitalist societies. Atwood's dystopia thus becomes a postmodern allegory of power, where class is inseparable from gender and ideology. Through irony and subversion, she exposes how systems of control perpetuate themselves by internalizing hierarchy within the very subjects they oppress.

The Handmaid's Tale transforms the notion of class from a purely material category into a symbolic order rooted in power, ideology, and gendered experience. Atwood reveals that the most enduring forms of class oppression are not enforced solely through wealth or occupation but through cultural and linguistic mechanisms that define identity itself. By situating her critique within a postmodern framework, Atwood dismantles the illusion of moral order and exposes the terrifying efficiency of ideological conformity. Her vision of Gilead thus stands as both a feminist and class critique, warning that totalitarianism begins not with overt violence but with the quiet reorganization of social hierarchy under the guise of order and purity.

3. Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* –

The theme of class is intricately woven into the broader tapestry of colonial legacy, national identity, and historical transformation. The novel captures the birth of a nation and the simultaneous birth of its protagonist, Saleem Sinai, at the exact moment of India's independence—an allegorical gesture that fuses the individual's destiny with that of the newly liberated nation. Rushdie's portrayal of postcolonial India exposes the gap between the ideals of equality and the realities of class division, showing how colonial structures of privilege persist under the guise of modern nation-building. The promise of freedom quickly gives way to corruption, elitism, and political manipulation, as new hierarchies emerge to replace the old. In this way, Rushdie underscores that the end of colonial rule does not dissolve class inequality; rather, it reconfigures it within indigenous power systems, perpetuating cycles of dominance and exclusion.

Rushdie's postmodern style—marked by fragmentation, allegory, and magical realism—reflects the fractured social and political reality of India itself. The novel's nonlinear narrative structure mirrors the chaotic, multi-layered identity of a nation attempting to define itself amidst competing histories and ideologies. The fantastical elements, such as Saleem's telepathic connection to other children born at the midnight of independence, serve as allegorical representations of India's diverse yet divided population. Each "Midnight's Child" embodies a different aspect of the national consciousness—language, religion, class, or region—suggesting that the dream of unity is an illusion sustained by myth rather than reality. Through this symbolic multiplicity, Rushdie critiques the failure of the postcolonial state to translate its rhetoric of democracy and inclusivity into actual social equality.

Class mobility in *Midnight's Children* is depicted as precarious and illusory. Saleem's own family rises from mercantile affluence to political prominence, only to face moral and spiritual disintegration. The novel's shifting narrative voice captures the instability of class identity, where privilege is continually undermined by historical forces and personal disillusionment. Rushdie's depiction of the Emergency under Indira Gandhi highlights how authoritarianism and state control deepen class disparities, turning political power into another form of economic dominance. The sterilization campaigns and forced evictions represent the oppression of the poor under modern bureaucracy, revealing that independence did not liberate the marginalized but merely replaced colonial masters with native elites.

Through intertextuality and parody, Rushdie also challenges the grand narratives of nationalism and progress that sustain class hierarchies. His playful yet politically charged prose dismantles the myth of a unified Indian identity, exposing the contradictions within postcolonial modernity. The use of magic realism functions not as escapism but as a means of representing the surreal contradictions of Indian society—where wealth and poverty, progress and decay, freedom and repression coexist. Rushdie's narrative questions whether post-independence India truly achieved sovereignty or simply inherited the colonial logic of inequality.

Midnight's Children transforms class into a historical and psychological construct, inseparable from the legacies of empire and the failures of nationhood. Rushdie's postmodern storytelling reveals that social divisions are sustained not only by economic systems but by collective amnesia, mythmaking, and political manipulation. His vision of India is one of hybridity and fragmentation, where every attempt to impose order generates new forms of chaos. Through irony, parody, and magical realism, Rushdie exposes the fragile foundations of social harmony and the enduring entanglement of class with power, history, and identity in postcolonial India.

4. Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* –

The class oppression operates through the intricate and enduring framework of caste, gender, and social taboo, revealing how systemic hierarchies are internalized within both individual consciousness and cultural memory. Set in Kerala during the late twentieth century, the novel exposes how postcolonial India continues to be haunted by its ancient caste divisions, despite the façade of modern democracy and progress. Roy's narrative intertwines the personal and the political, showing that oppression is not merely institutional but deeply embedded in the texture of daily life. The love between Ammu, an upper-caste Syrian Christian woman, and Velutha, a Paravan (Untouchable) carpenter, becomes a transgressive act that destabilizes the social order. Their relationship, forbidden by both caste and convention, symbolizes the desire for human connection across boundaries that society has rendered sacred and immovable.

Roy portrays the brutality of caste-based class oppression not only through external acts of violence but also through the internalized fear, shame, and silence that govern her characters' lives. Velutha's murder by the police—sanctioned by both the community and the family he served—exposes the complicity of social institutions in sustaining inequality. Ammu's subsequent ostracization and tragic death demonstrate how women bear the double burden of class and gender oppression. Through this lens, Roy's novel extends beyond the story of individual suffering to become a larger critique of systemic injustice, where social order is maintained through emotional repression, linguistic control, and the policing of desire.

The novel's nonlinear structure—its movement back and forth in time—functions as a powerful postmodern device that mirrors the cyclical and repetitive nature of oppression. Memory in Roy's narrative is fragmented, nonlinear, and often unreliable, suggesting that history itself is unstable and open to reinterpretation. The disjointed chronology allows Roy to collapse past and present, showing that trauma does not remain in history but continues to reverberate in the present. The recurring images of the river, the toy boat, and the "Love Laws" ("the laws that lay down who should be loved, and how, and how much") serve as metaphors for the invisible boundaries of caste and class that dictate every social interaction. Roy's use of language—lyrical, playful, yet politically charged—embodies a form of resistance against the hegemonic discourses that define purity and pollution.

Roy's postmodern narrative strategies—multiple perspectives, fragmented temporality, intertextual references, and the child's point of view—disrupt traditional realism and invite readers to confront the contradictions of Indian society. By filtering the narrative through the twins, Estha and Rahel, Roy captures how caste and class hierarchies are absorbed into the consciousness of children, illustrating the process of social conditioning that perpetuates discrimination. Her style—often poetic, ironic, and cyclical—creates a rhythm that mirrors both the beauty and the brutality of the world she depicts.

The God of Small Things transforms the political into the personal, showing that class and caste oppression are not abstract social forces but intimate experiences that shape identity, memory, and emotion. Roy's novel situates class within the continuum of colonial history, patriarchy, and cultural myth, revealing how the oppressed are not only silenced but also systematically erased from historical narratives. The

forbidden love of Ammu and Velutha becomes both an act of defiance and a tragedy, symbolizing the impossibility of equality in a world structured by hierarchy. Through her postmodern narrative form and humanistic vision, Roy exposes the moral and emotional cost of social stratification, compelling readers to confront the deep fractures that persist beneath the surface of modern India.

Findings of the Study:

1. Class as a Construct: Social class is portrayed as a cultural and ideological construct rather than a stable economic category.
2. Consumerism and Alienation: Postmodern novels link class identity with consumer culture and alienation.
3. Intersectionality: Class interacts with gender, race, and globalization, producing layered identities.
4. Critique of Capitalism: Postmodern fiction exposes the hollowness of capitalist promises of equality.
5. Narrative Fragmentation: Fragmented storytelling mirrors fragmented social consciousness.
6. Persistence of Inequality: Despite postmodern claims of diversity and freedom, economic and social inequalities endure.

Conclusion:

The representation of social class in postmodern fiction highlights the paradox of modernity—a world that claims to transcend class divisions while perpetuating new forms of inequality. Through irony, fragmentation, and intertextual play, postmodern authors uncover the mechanisms by which capitalism disguises hierarchy as freedom.

Writers such as DeLillo, Atwood, Rushdie, and Roy expose the persistence of class distinctions beneath the surfaces of consumerism, patriarchy, and nationalism. Their narratives remind readers that the postmodern condition, despite its fluidity and pluralism, is still structured by economic and social disparities. Ultimately, postmodern fiction transforms class analysis from a static model of hierarchy into a dynamic exploration of power, identity, and resistance.

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