

Exploring Gramscian Concepts of Coercion and Hegemony in Gulliver's Travels and The Metamorphosis

Mehrab Hossain Mazumdar¹, Rubaiyan Asif²

¹Post Graduate/ First Author, Department of English, Noakhali Science and Technology University, Noakhali-3814

²Assistant Professor, Department of English, Noakhali Science and Technology University, Noakhali - 3814

Abstract

Power, whether colonial or capitalist, is an enduring force that transcends historical boundaries shaping societies and individuals alike. This study delves into the universal dynamics of power through a comparative lens, analyzing Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* and Franz Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*. By intertwining Gramsci's theories of coercion and hegemony, Marx's concept of commodification, and Althusser's theory of interpellation, the research uncovers how visible and invisible systems of control operate across disparate contexts. Swift's satirical critique of colonial absurdities contrasts sharply with Kafka's haunting portrayal of capitalist alienation, yet both reveal a cyclical, fluid interplay of the oppressor and the oppressed. Bridging post-colonial and Marxist critiques, this work challenges conventional binaries of freedom and oppression offering profound insights into the mechanisms of power that continue to shape modern realities. By exposing the persistent undercurrents of control, this research calls for a deeper interrogation of the societal structures that define liberation.

Keywords: Coercion, Commodification, Freedom, Hegemony, Interpellation, Power, Oppression.

Introduction

Power has always shaped the fabric of human societies. It influences how nations are governed, how cultures interact, and how identities are defined. As Fanon (2004) argues in *The Wretched of the Earth*, colonization imposes economic and cultural domination, leaving deep psychological scars on the colonized. Independence, on the other hand, is celebrated as the ultimate triumph of freedom, yet its promises often fail to dismantle systems of domination fully (Fanon, 2004)

This study challenges the conventional binary of colonization as oppression and independence as freedom. Through an exploration of two literary masterpieces entitled *Gulliver's Travels* (1726) and *The Metamorphosis* (1915), it seeks to uncover how systems of domination persist, regardless of historical and cultural contexts. As Edward Said argues in *Culture and Imperialism*, these systems of power transcend temporal and cultural boundaries, shaping individuals through both visible coercion and invisible ideological control (Said, 1993).

Colonization has often been critiqued for its destructive impacts on culture, identity, and autonomy. For instance, Chinua Achebe's (1958) *Things Fall Apart* vividly portrays the collapse of the Igbo community

under British rule, emphasizing the violence of cultural imposition. Conversely, independence is celebrated in Gitanjali where Tagore glorifies freedom as the highest aspiration: “Where the mind is without fear and the head is held high; Where knowledge is free” (1912). These perspectives create a dominant narrative that colonization is inherently oppressive and independence is inherently liberating, though this narrative often oversimplifies the complexities of power.

By exploring Antonio Gramsci’s concepts of coercion and hegemony, this study reveals how Gulliver’s Travels and The Metamorphosis expose the cyclical and systemic nature of domination. Swift’s satirical portrayal of colonial absurdities highlights the visible forms of power, while Kafka unravels the insidious ways capitalism alienates and dehumanizes individuals.

Gramsci’s concepts of coercion and hegemony form the theoretical backbone of this study. Coercion refers to the visible, often physical enforcement of power, such as the military subjugation seen in colonial contexts. Hegemony, in contrast, operates through cultural and ideological systems, embedding dominant values into societal norms to secure compliance without force (Gramsci, 1971, pp.12,28)

Complementing Gramsci’s framework are Marx’s concept of commodification and Althusser’s theory of interpellation. While commodification explains the dehumanization of individuals under capitalist systems, interpellation reveals how individuals internalize societal ideologies, perpetuating their own oppression (Althusser, 1971). These theories collectively provide a nuanced lens to analyze Gulliver’s Travels and The Metamorphosis, revealing how visible and invisible forms of power sustain domination.

Methodology

The research adopts a qualitative approach, employing close textual analysis to explore how coercion and hegemony operate in the selected texts. Gramsci’s concepts serve as the primary theoretical lens, supported by Marxist and Althusserian frameworks to analyze colonial and capitalist systems of domination. Secondary sources, including scholarly articles and historical critiques, enrich the analysis and provide contextual details.

Literature Review

The existing body of scholarly literature on Antonio Gramsci’s theories of coercion and consent has significantly advanced our understanding of power dynamics within societies. Gramsci’s (1971) conceptual framework remains influential for analyzing the mechanisms through which ruling classes maintain dominance, combining visible coercion with cultural consent. These ideas have inspired diverse applications across political, historical, and literary studies.

Morton (2007) in *On Gramsci* also explores Gramsci’s concept of hegemony and its relationship to Marxist theory, emphasizing the role of organic intellectuals in shaping the balance of power. His subsequent book, *Unravelling Gramsci: Hegemony and Passive Revolution in the Global Political Economy*, extends these ideas to the global economic context, demonstrating how Gramsci’s theories illuminate international power dynamics (Morton, 2007, 1-426).

“Hegemony, Coercion, and Consensus,” discusses how hegemony functions as a control mechanism adopted by the ruling class, intertwining coercion and consent to sustain dominance (Esu, 2021, p.341). Similarly, “Hegemony and the Operation of Consensus and Coercion,” examines the interplay between consensus and coercion within hegemonic rule, offering insights into how these dynamics operate at both societal and institutional levels (Hawson and Smith, 2008, p.1-15). Watkins (1992) applies Gramsci’s theories to educational administration, illustrating how systems of power rely on both consent

and coercion to sustain authority.

While Gramsci's theories have been widely applied, there remains a gap in their application to literary texts such as *Gulliver's Travels* and *The Metamorphosis*. This thesis addresses this gap by exploring how Swift critiques colonialism through satire and Kafka critiques capitalist systems through allegory. By analyzing these texts through the lens of coercion and consent, this research reveals the shared reliance of colonial and capitalist systems on visible force and ideological control, contributing to a deeper understanding of the persistence of domination in human societies.

Discussion

Gramsci's Concepts of Coercion and Hegemony

Antonio Gramsci's theories of coercion and hegemony provide a lens to analyze power dynamics in literature. Coercion refers to overt forms of domination, such as military force or legal systems, while hegemony operates through ideological control, embedding dominant values into societal norms to ensure compliance without force (Gramsci, 1971, p. –12, 37, 49–52, 100–110, 143, 152, 252).

Application to *Gulliver's Travels*: In Lilliput, Gulliver's physical restraint by tiny ropes symbolizes colonial powers' reliance on coercion despite their apparent weakness. The Lilliputians' military strategies mirror the visible domination used by empires to control larger territories (Gramsci, 1971, p. –12, 37, 49–52, 100–110, 143, 152, 252).

Conversely, the Houyhnhnms represent hegemony, as their rational society enforces conformity not through physical force but through ideological superiority. Gulliver's admiration for their values leads to his rejection of his humanity, reflecting how hegemony secures compliance by reshaping beliefs and desires (Gramsci, 1971, p. –12, 37, 49–52, 100–110, 143, 152, 252).

Application to *The Metamorphosis*: In Kafka's novella, coercion is less visible but no less potent. Gregor Samsa's internalized sense of duty illustrates how capitalist societies enforce compliance through hegemonic norms. His transformation into an insect renders him unable to fulfill his economic role, exposing his family's dependence on capitalist expectations (Kafka, 1915, p. 3, 16, 29, 39, 45, 55).

The family's eventual rejection of Gregor, despite his sacrifices, demonstrates how hegemony dehumanizes individuals by prioritizing productivity over humanity (Althusser, 1971, p.85-126)

Marx's Concept of Commodification

Karl Marx's theory of commodification, which dehumanizes individuals by reducing them to their economic utility, complements Gramsci's framework.

Application to *The Metamorphosis*: Gregor Samsa epitomizes commodification. Before his transformation, he is valued solely for his financial contributions. The moment he can no longer work, he becomes a burden, illustrating the transactional nature of relationships in capitalist societies (Kafka, 1915, p. 3, 16, 29, 39, 45, 55).

This commodification is evident when Gregor's family chooses to exclude him from their lives rather than adapt to his changed condition (Kafka, 1915, p. 3, 16, 29, 39, 45, 55).

Kafka uses Gregor's death as a critique of a system that discards individuals who are no longer productive.

Application to *Gulliver's Travels*: In Brobdingnag, Gulliver is commodified as an object of curiosity and entertainment. The king's moral critique of European politics underscores the exploitative nature of commodification in colonial systems, where resources and people are valued only for their utility to the colonizers (Swift, 2005, p. 9–12, 37, 49–52, 100–110, 143, 152, 252).

Althusser's Theory of Interpellation

Louis Althusser's theory of interpellation explains how individuals internalize dominant ideologies, perceiving them as natural or inevitable. This framework is essential for understanding the invisible mechanisms of power in both texts.

Application to The Metamorphosis: Gregor's overwhelming guilt about his inability to work demonstrates his internalization of capitalist norms. Even after his transformation, he worries about his employer and family's financial stability, reflecting how deeply societal expectations shape his identity (Kafka, 1915, p. 3, 16, 29, 39, 45, 55). This internalized oppression ensures compliance without the need for external enforcement (Althusser, 1971).

Application to Gulliver's Travels: In Laputa, the rulers' intellectual superiority is presented as natural, legitimizing their control over the lands below. Gulliver, too, internalizes the ideologies of the societies he visits, often admiring their systems despite their flaws. His eventual alienation in the Houyhnhnm society reflects the consequences of internalizing hegemonic values to the point of self-rejection (Swift, 2005).

Visible Coercion in Gulliver's Travels

In Gulliver's Travels, coercion is overt and visible. The Lilliputians' ability to restrain Gulliver with ropes symbolizes the military and technological strategies colonial powers used to dominate larger, resource-rich territories (Swift, 2005). The absurdity of Lilliputian politics, including the war over how to crack eggs, mocks the trivial justifications for imperialist expansion (Swift, 2005).

Similarly, in Laputa, the floating island's control over the lands below reflects the physical and economic domination colonial powers exerted on subjugated nations. The Laputans' reliance on technology to intimidate underscores how visible coercion, though effective, requires constant reinforcement to maintain authority [13]. This aligns with Gramsci's assertion that coercion, while powerful, is inherently unstable without ideological support (Gramsci, 1971).

Invisible Coercion in The Metamorphosis

In contrast, Kafka (1915) portrays coercion as psychological and internalized. Gregor Samsa's transformation into an insect highlights his reduced status in a capitalist system that values individuals solely for their economic contributions. Unlike Gulliver's physical restraints, Gregor's domination stems from his internalized guilt over his inability to work. Even in his insect form, Gregor's first concern is missing work, reflecting the insidious power of capitalist norms (Kafka, 1915, p. 3, 16, 29, 39, 45, 55).

This depiction aligns with Marx's theory of alienation, where workers are estranged from their humanity, their labor, and their communities. Gregor's family's rejection of him after his transformation symbolizes the transactional nature of relationships shaped by capitalist values, where worth is measured by economic utility (Marx, 1976, p. 324).

Coercion and Hegemony in Gulliver's Travels

Jonathan Swift's Gulliver's Travels is not just a whimsical tale of fantastical voyages. It is a sharp satire of the colonial mindset and the systems of domination that sustain empires. Through Gulliver's interactions with different societies, Swift explores how power operates, whether through visible coercion, like the physical restraint Gulliver faces in Lilliput, or through subtler ideological control, as seen in the

Houyhnhnms' rational society. Swift presents Gulliver as both dominator and dominated, reflecting the fluid and context-dependent nature of power (Swift, 2005).

Power Dynamics Across Gulliver's Voyages

In Lilliput, Gulliver finds himself bound and helpless at first, symbolizing how colonial powers often relied on clever strategies to control larger territories. However, his dominance soon becomes apparent. Gulliver's sheer size gives him immense power, and the Lilliputians quickly recognize this, relying on him for their military ambitions. One of Gulliver's most significant acts is his role in the war against Blefuscu. By dragging the entire Blefuscu fleet across the sea, Gulliver secures a decisive victory for the Lilliputians (Swift, 2005). This act transforms him from a restrained figure into a dominating force.

Despite his physical dominance, Gulliver's moral choices reveal another layer of control. When the Lilliputian emperor demands that Gulliver annihilate Blefuscu's population and enslave its people, Gulliver refuses, asserting his moral superiority. As he explains, "I plainly protested that I would never be an instrument of bringing a free and brave people into slavery" (Swift, 2005). This defiance highlights Gulliver's intellectual and ethical authority, forcing the emperor to accept his decision.

Swift uses Lilliput to mock colonial practices. The absurd "egg-breaking war" satirizes the trivial reasons nations often give for warfare, such as religious or territorial disputes (Swift, 2005). This critique aligns with Gramsci's idea that coercion is never stable without a narrative to justify it (Gramsci, 1971).

In Brobdingnag, the dynamics of power are reversed. Gulliver becomes the powerless one, dwarfed by the giant Brobdingnagians. This shift emphasizes how fragile domination is, depending entirely on who holds the advantage. Gulliver's treatment by the Brobdingnagians critiques the dehumanization inherent in colonial systems. The commodification of Gulliver parallels Marx's idea of commodification, where individuals are valued solely for their utility or novelty (Marx, 1976).

Laputa: Intellectual Domination

Laputa, the floating island ruled by intellectuals, represents a different form of domination. Unlike the Lilliputians or Brobdingnagians, the Laputans maintain control through their technological and intellectual superiority. The threat of crushing rebellious lands by lowering the island symbolizes how colonial powers used fear and intimidation to subjugate others (Swift, 2005).

However, the Laputans' obsession with abstract knowledge, such as measuring the stars, renders them ineffective leaders. Swift uses this detachment to critique the impracticality of systems that prioritize ideology over the needs of the people. This reflects Gramsci's concept of hegemony, where power is sustained not through physical force but through cultural and intellectual dominance (Gramsci, 1971).

The Houyhnhnms: Rationality and Exclusion

The Houyhnhnms, often seen as Swift's ideal society, reveal the dangers of ideological domination. Governed by reason and logic, the Houyhnhnms maintain peace and order. However, their treatment of the Yahoos—humanoid creatures they consider inferior—shows the exclusionary nature of their society. By dehumanizing the Yahoos, the Houyhnhnms create a rigid hierarchy that justifies their dominance (Swift, 2005).

Gulliver's increasing admiration for the Houyhnhnms reflects how individuals internalize dominant ideologies. He begins to reject his own humanity, seeing himself as more aligned with the rational horses.

This aligns with Althusser's idea of interpellation, where individuals adopt societal values to the point of reshaping their identity (Althusser, 1971).

Coercion and Hegemony in The Metamorphosis

Capitalism's Grip on the Individual

Franz Kafka's *The Metamorphosis* presents a harrowing portrayal of how power operates invisibly within capitalist societies. Unlike *Gulliver's Travels*, which critiques the visible coercion of colonial systems, Kafka's novella delves into the ideological and psychological mechanisms that control individuals. Gregor Samsa's transformation into an insect symbolizes the dehumanization and commodification of individuals under capitalism. His alienation, both personal and familial, exposes how hegemonic systems enforce compliance through societal expectations and internalized guilt (Kafka, 1915, p. 3, 16, 29, 39, 45, 55). Through Gregor's tragic story and the shifting dynamics within his family, Kafka critiques a world where productivity determines worth and emotional bonds become transactional.

Invisible Coercion and Familial Expectations

Gregor's Commodification

Before his transformation, Gregor is the sole provider for his family, working relentlessly as a traveling salesman to pay off his father's debts. His value is entirely tied to his economic contributions, reflecting Karl Marx's concept of commodification, where individuals are valued only for their utility (Marx, 1976). This dynamic becomes painfully clear after his transformation. Unable to work, Gregor is no longer seen as a person but as a burden, a shift embodied in his sister Grete's eventual rejection. Grete states, "We must try to get rid of it... If it were Gregor, he would have gone away long ago" (Kafka, 1915, p.3, 16, 29, 39, 45, 55) marking the moment she no longer sees him as her brother.

Kafka uses Gregor's plight to critique capitalist systems that strip individuals of their humanity. Even before his transformation, Gregor's life revolves around his job. He expresses his dissatisfaction but feels trapped, lamenting, "Oh God, what a demanding job I've chosen! Traveling day in and day out" (Kafka, 1915, p. 3, 16, 29, 39, 45, 55). His transformation into an insect externalizes his dehumanization, making visible the condition of a life consumed by work. This grotesque physical change highlights how capitalism reduces individuals to mere tools, valuable only for their labor.

The Family as an Instrument of Coercion

Gregor's family, particularly his father, enforces societal expectations with increasing hostility. After Gregor's transformation, his father becomes a figure of coercion, symbolized by the violent act of throwing an apple that lodges in Gregor's back (Kafka, 1915, p. 3, 16, 29, 39, 45, 55).

The apple, which remains embedded and causes lasting pain, becomes a physical manifestation of familial rejection and societal cruelty. Its biblical connotations evoke punishment for transgressing societal norms, reinforcing Gregor's role as a scapegoat for the family's struggles.

The family's response to Gregor reflects the broader mechanisms of capitalist coercion. Once Gregor is incapacitated, his father reclaims authority within the household, taking on a job and asserting control. This shift mirrors Antonio Gramsci's idea of coercion, where visible acts of dominance reinforce hierarchies within a system (Gramsci, 1971). The family's growing resentment toward Gregor reveals how deeply capitalist values infiltrate personal relationships, turning love and care into conditional constructs.

Grete's transformation is particularly significant. Initially compassionate, she takes on a caretaker role, bringing Gregor food and cleaning his room. However, as the burden of his care grows, Grete adopts the same values that prioritize survival over compassion. By the end, she has become the family's new hope, her future replacing Gregor's past role as provider. This shift underscores how individuals unconsciously enforce hegemonic norms, adapting to the system that dehumanizes them (Kafka, 1915, p. 3, 16, 29, 39, 45, 55).

Hegemony and Internalized Oppression

Gregor's Internalized Guilt

One of the most poignant aspects of *The Metamorphosis* is Gregor's unwavering guilt over his inability to work. Even in his dehumanized state, his primary concern is the financial impact of his absence on his family. He thinks, "If I didn't hold back because of my parents, I'd have quit ages ago" (Kafka, 1915, p. 3, 16, 29, 39, 45, 55) acknowledging his dissatisfaction but remaining bound by societal expectations. This reflects Louis Althusser's concept of interpellation, where individuals internalize dominant ideologies, perceiving them as natural and inevitable (Althusser, 1971).

Gregor's guilt becomes a form of invisible coercion, ensuring his compliance even after his transformation. Rather than rebelling against the family or the system that exploited him, Gregor accepts his suffering as justified. This internalization highlights the insidious nature of hegemony, which achieves control without the need for direct enforcement.

The Family's Compliance with Hegemony

While Gregor's internal struggles illustrate personal oppression, his family's actions reflect societal complicity. After Gregor's transformation, the family adapts to their new roles, with each member taking on a job to compensate for the loss of Gregor's income (Kafka, 1915, p. 3, 16, 29, 39, 45, 55). This shift demonstrates how hegemonic systems push individuals to conform without questioning the structures that enforce this behavior.

The family's rejection of Gregor mirrors their acceptance of capitalist values. By prioritizing productivity over emotional bonds, they embody the transactional nature of relationships in a capitalist society. Grete's assertion that Gregor must be removed—"We must try to get rid of it" (Kafka, 1915, p. 3, 16, 29, 39, 45, 55)—marks the family's full alignment with these norms. Their hope for Grete's future, discussed in the novella's closing scene, suggests that they have fully embraced the system that dehumanized Gregor in the first place (Kafka, 1915, p. 3, 16, 29, 39, 45, 55).

Conclusion

This study has explored the themes of coercive and consensual domination as articulated by Antonio Gramsci in *Gulliver's Travels* by Jonathan Swift and *The Metamorphosis* by Franz Kafka. By examining visible and invisible domination across colonial and capitalist contexts, this research has provided a nuanced understanding of power dynamics and their fluidity within diverse historical and societal structures.

The study challenges the glorification of independence and the notion that overt control is inherently more oppressive than subtle, consensual forms of domination. It underscores that individuals in both colonized and non-colonized societies are subjected to varying forms of control, revealing the instinctual and cyclical nature of power. As illustrated by characters such as the dwarf in *Brobdingnag* (Swift, 2005), the

impoverished farmer (Swift,2005) Gulliver, and Gregor Samsa's family members (Kafka,1915, p. 3, 16, 29, 39, 45, 55) domination is perpetuated across different circumstances. Victims, when given the opportunity, often become victimizers, demonstrating that power roles are neither fixed nor absolute but shaped by context and opportunity.

This analysis critiques the traditional narratives that portray colonizers and rulers solely as perpetrators of brutality. Instead, it reveals the universality of power struggles and the inherent human tendencies that sustain these dynamics. Through Swift's satirical critique of colonialism (Swift,2005) and Kafka's grotesque portrayal of capitalist alienation (Kafka,1915,p. 3, 16, 29, 39, 45, 55), this research highlights how literature serves as a powerful lens for examining societal structures and power relationships.

By emphasizing the complexities of coercion, hegemony (Gramsci,1971) and commodification (Marx 1976), this study contributes to post-colonial discourse and deepens our understanding of the intricate and multifaceted nature of domination. The findings encourage readers to critically examine the cyclical nature of power, victimization, and the human condition within broader societal contexts.

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