

Jose Rizal's "to the Filipino Youth": A Marxist Perspective on Empowerment and Societal Change

Blessly A. Despi¹, Ma.Rosa S. Caraballe, Phd²

¹Carlos Hilado Memorial State University

²Talisay City, Negros Occidental, Philippines

ABSTRACT

Literature reflects and refracts the socio-historical realities in which it is produced, often encoding ideological positions shaped by power relations and material conditions. Anchored in Marxist Literary Theory advanced by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, this qualitative study analyzed José Rizal's poem "*To the Filipino Youth*" through a Marxist critical lens. The study aimed to examine how the poem reflected the social and historical conditions of Spanish colonial Philippines, revealed class tensions and power structures, and negotiated ideological positions related to empowerment, oppression, and false consciousness. Using qualitative textual analysis and close reading, the research interpreted the poem as a cultural text that mobilizes the Filipino youth as agents of national renewal while simultaneously reproducing certain dominant ideological assumptions. Findings revealed that the poem articulated emancipatory themes such as intellectual awakening, collective potential, and resistance to domination; however, it also exhibited elements of false consciousness by idealizing reformist aspirations and indirectly accommodating colonial authority. This contradiction highlighted the tension between revolutionary potential and ideological containment within the text. The study demonstrated that Marxist criticism deepened the understanding of Rizal's poem by uncovering both its transformative impulses and its ideological limitations, thereby contributing to a more nuanced appreciation of Philippine colonial literature within its socio-economic and historical context.

KEYWORDS: Marxism, Power Relations, Empowerment, Societal Change, Qualitative Textual Analysis.

ARTICLE DETAILS

Published On:
23 January 2026

Available on:
<https://ijiissh.com/>

INTRODUCTION

Literature mirrors society, reflecting complex interactions of power, class struggle, and ideology. Marxist criticism is a powerful analytical lens for revealing how socio-economic conditions and class relations shape texts and meanings (Eagleton, T, 1976 as cited by Zhang & Foley, 2021). This approach sees literature not only as artistic expression but also as a product and reproducer of social forces and material conditions (Smethurst, 2020).

A central Marxist concept is false consciousness: the idea that subordinate groups internalize dominant ideologies, thereby obscuring their exploitation and diminishing the probability of collective resistance (Ervin, 2023; Kogelmann, 2024). In literary study, false consciousness appears when texts or characters adopt the values of ruling groups or when emancipatory rhetoric masks structural oppression (Ervin, 2023).

Incorporating Marxist criticism into literary analysis enriches our understanding of texts by unraveling the layers of power dynamics and ideological struggles that shape their narratives. By examining how literature reflects and refracts societal conditions, we gain insight into the complex relationship between art and the socio-economic milieu. According to Eagleton (2017), "Marxist criticism is not merely a 'sociology of literature,' concerned with how novels get published and whether they mention the working class. It aims to explain the literary work more fully; and this means a sensitive attention to its forms, styles, and meanings" [2].

José Rizal, Filipino nationalist, writer, and reformer, wrote during a period of intense colonial domination in the late nineteenth century. His poem "*To the Filipino Youth*" speaks to youth as agents of moral and national renewal, and it can be read through Marxist categories—class consciousness, ideological struggle, and the potential for social transformation (Altez-Albela, 2020).

Thus, this study analyzed how Marxist theory is revealed in Jose Rizal's "*To the Filipino Youth*" message. It can be analyzed through a Marxist lens, revealing themes of class consciousness, societal change, and the empowerment of the marginalized.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

This study analyzed how Marxist theory is revealed in Jose Rizal's "To the Filipino Youth" message. Specifically, it sought answers to the following questions:

1. How does the work reflect the social/historical conditions?
2. Where does the text show class conflict as the source of struggle and tension?
3. Does the work enforce or showcase capitalist or classist values and power structures?
4. In what ways does the work seem to support a Marxist agenda, but also exhibit a false

consciousness that returns to the status quo instead?

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is anchored on the Marxist Literary Theory by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels. This theory advances that literary texts are products of people's social, material, and historical, conditions and are shaped by prevailing class relations and economic structures (Marx, K., & Engels, F., 1978). From this point of view, literature serves as an avenue to articulate one's ideology, class struggle, or even power and not just a way to express the arts. Considering the poem of Jose Rizal's "To the Filipino Youth", this theory can help analyze how the literary text critiques colonial oppression and shows the role of the Filipino youth as a sociolect that is capable of challenging emerging colonial ideologies that affect the society.

Research Method

A qualitative research method is employed in this study focusing on textual analysis that is grounded in Marxist literary criticism (Tyson, L, 2015). Since this research sought to interpret meaning, socio-political implications, and ideologies embedded in a literary text rather than measure variables quantitatively, thus, qualitative textual analysis is appropriate. Close reading and critical interpretation was also used to examine how Jose Rizal's "To the Filipino Youth" reflects and critiques class relations, colonial power structures, and ideological domination during the Spanish colonial period. Further, Marxist approach guided the analysis by focusing on the themes embedded in the poem which include empowerment, oppression, collective action, and social consciousness, which allowed the poem to be interpreted as a cultural text that advocates societal transformation.

Source of Data

Jose Rizal's "To the Filipino Youth," served as the source of data and the central text as focus of analysis (Rizal, J, 2007) as follows:

To the Philippine Youth

Hold high the brow serene,
O youth, where now you stand;
Let the bright sheen
Of your grace be seen,
Fair hope of my fatherland!

Come now, thou genius grand,
And bring down inspiration;
With thy mighty hand,
Swifter than the wind's violation,
Raise the eager mind to higher station.

Come down with pleasing light
Of art and science to the fight,
O youth, and there untie
The chains that heavy lie,
Your spirit free to blight.
See how in flaming zone
Amid the shadows thrown,
The Spaniard's holy hand
A crown's resplendent band
Proffers to this Indian land.

Thou, who now wouldst rise
On wings of rich emprise,
Seeking from Olympian skies
Songs of sweetest strain,
Softer than ambrosial rain;

Thou, whose voice divine
Rivals Philomel's refrain
And with varied line
Through the night benign
Frees mortality from pain;

Thou, who by sharp strife
Wakest thy mind to life ;
And the memory bright
Of thy genius' light
Makest immortal in its strength ;

And thou, in accents clear
Of Phoebus, to Apelles dear ;
Or by the brush's magic art
Takest from nature's store a part,
To fig it on the simple canvas' length ;

Go forth, and then the sacred fire
Of thy genius to the laurel may aspire ;
To spread around the fame,
And in victory acclaim,
Through wider spheres the human name.

Day, O happy day,
Fair Filipinas, for thy land!
So bless the Power to-day
That places in thy way
This favor and this fortune grand!

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

How does the work reflect the social or historical conditions?

The poem "To the Filipino Youth" by Jose Rizal reflects the social and historical conditions of its time in a few ways. Even though the poem doesn't directly talk about specific events or situations, we can understand its message in the context of what was happening in the Philippines during the late 19th century. The image of "*the Spaniard's holy hand / A crown's resplendent band / Proffers to this Indian land*" reveals the imposition of external authority and symbolic domination. The poem's appeal to youth as "fair hope of my fatherland" frames younger generations as the locus of potential social regeneration—a rhetorical strategy that both motivates political commitment and cultivates a moral mission for national renewal (Altez-Albela, 2020).

At that time, the Philippines was under Spanish colonial rule, which meant that the Spanish government and culture had a significant influence on the country. The poem talks about the "*Spaniard's holy hand*" offering a "*crown's resplendent band*" to the Philippines. This symbolizes the control and influence of the Spanish rulers over the country.

The poem's call for the youth to rise and bring positive change could be seen as a response to the challenges faced by the Filipino people under colonial rule. The reference to "*fair hope of my fatherland*" suggests that the youth were seen as a source of hope for the nation's future.

Additionally, the poem's emphasis on unity and the idea of breaking free from chains might reflect the desire for freedom from colonial oppression. The call for the youth to use their voices, skills, and knowledge to uplift the nation implies that the people were striving for empowerment and autonomy.

So, while the poem doesn't directly describe historical events, it conveys a message that resonated with the social conditions of the time – the aspiration for change, empowerment, and freedom from colonial dominance.

Where does the text show class conflict as the source of struggle and tension?

In the poem "To the Filipino Youth," there isn't a direct mention of class conflict, but we can still see hints of struggle and tension that could relate to it. The poem mostly focuses on encouraging the youth to rise and make a positive difference for their nation.

We can interpret the "proletariat" as the ordinary people of the Philippines, especially the youth that Rizal addresses. They may not hold significant economic or political power and might be struggling against oppressive forces. The call for the youth to "*hold high the brow serene*" and to "*raise the eager mind to higher station*" could be seen as an encouragement for the "proletariat" – the Filipino youth – to rise above their current circumstances and strive for a better future.

On the other hand, while the poem doesn't explicitly mention a capitalist class, we can interpret certain references in relation to the "bourgeoisie." The lines "*The Spaniard's holy hand / A crown's resplendent band / Proffers to this Indian land*" might be seen as symbolizing a dominant force or authority, potentially representing the colonial powers or the ruling class. The "*crown's resplendent band*" could metaphorically allude to the wealth and authority of the ruling class or "bourgeoisie" that seeks to maintain control.

However, we might find a connection to class conflict in lines like "*Thou, who now wouldst rise / On wings of rich emprise.*" This suggests that there might be some sort of barrier or challenge that the youth need to overcome. This could symbolize the difficulties faced by those who want to rise above their current circumstances, which could include class-related challenges.

The poem also speaks about bringing down "*the chains that heavy lie,*" which might indirectly refer to overcoming obstacles or limitations. While the poem doesn't explicitly say that these are class-related challenges, the idea of breaking free from chains could be connected to the struggles that different classes might have faced in society.

So, even though the poem doesn't directly show class conflict as the source of struggle and tension, there are elements that hint at challenges that could be related to social and class differences.

Does the work enforce or showcase capitalist or classist values and power structures?

The poem has elements that suggest a desire for positive change and empowerment. It encourages the youth to rise and make a difference for their nation. It doesn't promote the idea of a particular class being superior to others. Instead, it emphasizes unity and empowerment. The poem speaks about bringing down chains and using one's voice and talents to uplift the country.

While the poem doesn't directly address capitalism or classism, it seems to advocate for a more equal and empowered society. It wants the youth to use their potential to make the nation better, which doesn't necessarily align with strict class divisions or oppressive power structures.

So, the poem leans more towards empowering the youth and promoting unity rather than enforcing capitalist or classist values and power structures.

In what ways does the work seem to support a Marxist agenda, but also exhibit a false consciousness that returns to the status quo instead? Where does the work contradict or deconstruct itself?

The poem "To the Filipino Youth" has elements that can be seen as supportive of a Marxist agenda, which emphasizes the working class rising against oppression. The poem encourages the youth to use their potential for positive change and empowerment, which aligns with Marxist ideas of challenging existing power structures.

However, there's a sense of "false consciousness" in the poem as well. While it urges the youth to rise against challenges, it doesn't directly address the colonial oppression under Spanish rule. The reference to the "Spaniard's holy hand" offering a crown might imply a certain level of acceptance or accommodation to the ruling power, which could be seen as a form of false consciousness where the youth may not fully recognize their oppression.

The poem might also exhibit contradictions or self-deconstruction. On one hand, it speaks about breaking chains and using voices to bring change, but on the other hand, it talks about "fair hope" and "bright sheen," which could suggest a more optimistic view of the situation than what might have been warranted under colonial oppression. This contrast might point to a contradiction between the call for change and the portrayal of hope in a challenging context.

In simple terms, while the poem seems to encourage a Marxist-like agenda of empowerment and challenging power, it also shows a level of false consciousness by not directly addressing the oppressive conditions. Additionally, the poem's optimistic tone contrasts with the difficult reality, suggesting some contradictions within its message.

CONCLUSION

In analyzing the poem "To the Filipino Youth," we can see that using Marxist criticism helps us understand deeper layers of its meaning. Marxist ideas highlight themes of empowerment, unity, and challenging power structures. Marxist criticism helps us see how the poem mobilizes youth as both agents of transformation and carriers of cultural ideals that can obscure material structures. Thus, Rizal's poem retains emancipatory potential, but Marxist analysis also warns us to remain attentive to ideological content that may function as false consciousness. Through Marxist criticism, we reveal the strengths and limitations of the poem's message, which increases our understanding of its meaning in the context of social and historical dynamics.

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