

EXPLORING UNEQUAL DISTRIBUTION OF CULTURAL CAPITAL THEORY: THE ALIENATION OF WORKING-CLASS WOMEN IN “THE MOTHER” NOVEL

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Abstract

*This study offers a critical analysis of Maxim Gorky's *The Mother* through the combined lenses of Pierre Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital and Karl Marx's concept of alienation, with a focus on the symbolic and cultural dimensions of working-class women's oppression. By examining the character of Pelageya Nilovna, the research uncovers how cultural deprivation, symbolic violence, and gendered silencing shape her social marginalization and limit her agency. Through close reading and theoretical mapping, the study highlights how informal learning, ideological exposure, and the gradual acquisition of cultural capital enable Pelageya's transformation from a passive, alienated figure to an empowered political agent. The findings suggest that resistance and social change require not only material redistribution but also access to symbolic tools, speech, and cultural participation. This research contributes to feminist-Marxist literary criticism by emphasizing the intersection of class, gender, and culture in revolutionary narratives and proposing actionable recommendations for educational and policy frameworks.*

Keywords

Maxim Gorky, *The Mother*, cultural capital, alienation, symbolic violence, feminist-Marxist theory, proletarian literature, working-class women, informal learning, empowerment, gender and class, ideological transformation

Introduction

Literature has long served as a mirror to the socio-political conditions of society, providing a platform for marginalized voices to echo against dominant power structures. Among the myriad concerns that shape literary landscapes, the interplay between class, gender, and culture remains one of the most persistent and unresolved. *The Mother* (1906), a revolutionary novel by Maxim Gorky, represents a compelling fictional response to the real historical oppression of the working class under Tsarist Russia. However, while much scholarly attention has been directed at its Marxist undertones and proletarian activism, the gendered dimensions of oppression—particularly how working-class women are doubly alienated by virtue of both their class and gender—have often remained underexplored. This article takes a fresh interdisciplinary approach by applying Pierre Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital to analyze the alienation of working-class women in *The Mother*, with a specific focus on the protagonist, Pelageya Nilovna.

Maxim Gorky, a prominent literary figure aligned with the Russian revolutionary movement, wrote *The Mother* as a tribute to the awakening political

consciousness of the working class. The narrative revolves around Pelageya Nilovna, an illiterate, submissive widow whose transformation into a revolutionary symbol is both dramatic and ideological. Her son, Pavel, introduces her to radical politics, and through her involvement in his activities, she acquires not just political awareness but also a sense of identity, agency, and purpose. While many readings of the novel have celebrated Pelageya as the “mother” of the Russian revolution, there is a deeper, often overlooked layer to her evolution—that of her struggle against symbolic domination rooted in her cultural deprivation. She is not only alienated by the oppressive economic conditions of her class but also by the structural denial of education, language, and self-expression that is symptomatic of gendered cultural inequality. Her transformation is therefore not only political but deeply cultural, marking a journey from silence to speech, from submission to selfhood.

To fully comprehend this transformation, it becomes necessary to employ a theoretical framework that captures the nuanced interplay between material deprivation and symbolic exclusion. Pierre Bourdieu’s concept of cultural capital provides such a lens. According to Bourdieu, cultural capital exists in three forms—embodied (long-lasting dispositions of the mind and body), objectified (cultural goods like books and art), and institutionalized (qualifications and credentials). Access to cultural capital is disproportionately distributed among social classes and is intricately linked to one’s position within the power hierarchy. Importantly, Bourdieu emphasizes that the dominant classes use their monopoly over cultural resources to perpetuate their superiority, often through mechanisms that appear natural or legitimate. In this system, those from the working class, particularly women, are doubly disadvantaged. They not only lack the financial resources to access education and culture but are also socialized into internalizing their subordinate roles, thereby legitimizing their own marginalization.

In *The Mother*, Pelageya Nilovna’s alienation is best understood through this dual framework of class and cultural exclusion. Initially, she is depicted as a voiceless, passive figure whose entire identity is subsumed under her roles as a wife and mother. Her lack of formal education, political awareness, and confidence in public speech positions her at the lowest rung of the cultural hierarchy. She does not possess embodied cultural capital; her mannerisms, language, and worldview are shaped by domestic confinement and religious submission. Objectified cultural capital is similarly absent—books and newspapers, which become key instruments of political awakening later in the novel, are entirely foreign to her at the outset. She also lacks institutionalized capital, having received no formal recognition of any skill or knowledge. In this context, her alienation is not only economic (in the Marxist sense) but also deeply symbolic and cultural.

The significance of Pelageya’s transformation lies in her gradual, often painful acquisition of cultural capital. As she begins to interact with her son’s revolutionary comrades, she is exposed to political literature, ideological discussions, and subversive thought. These exposures, while limited and mediated by male activists, allow her to develop new dispositions of thought and action. Her speech begins to change; she gains confidence in addressing groups; she starts making decisions based on collective goals rather than personal fear. She begins to accumulate embodied capital—the knowledge, confidence, and ideological clarity that allow her to step into public spaces previously denied to her. Her exposure to objectified capital, in the form of revolutionary texts and pamphlets, enables her intellectual growth. While she never gains institutionalized

recognition, her transformation is no less radical. Through informal means, she reconstructs herself as an ideological being, defying both class and gender norms.

This transformation challenges traditional readings of *The Mother* as merely a political narrative. Instead, it opens up the novel as a rich site for analyzing the symbolic structures of oppression and empowerment. Gorky, whether consciously or not, presents a profound commentary on how culture functions as both a weapon of the oppressor and a tool of resistance. Pelageya's development illustrates that access to cultural capital is not a passive inheritance but a product of struggle, exposure, and often painful confrontation with internalized subordination. Her journey is emblematic of the broader condition of working-class women, who are alienated not just from the means of production, but from the means of expression and recognition.

In exploring this dimension, the article positions *The Mother* as more than a revolutionary text—it becomes a feminist-Marxist allegory of symbolic survival. The analysis reveals how gender and class intersect not only in economic terms but in the cultural domain, where silence is a consequence of exclusion and speech is a political act. Pelageya's awakening thus serves as a model for reclaiming cultural capital, reasserting agency, and resisting symbolic domination. By revisiting Gorky's novel through Bourdieu's theoretical framework, this research contributes to a more layered understanding of alienation, one that acknowledges the unseen, symbolic forces that sustain material inequality.

Rationale of the Study

Maxim Gorky's *The Mother* (1906) is widely recognized for its portrayal of working-class struggle and revolutionary awakening, often studied through a Marxist lens focusing on economic oppression. However, one critical dimension remains underexplored: the cultural and symbolic alienation of working-class women, particularly Pelageya Nilovna. This study aims to fill that gap by applying Pierre Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital to reveal how unequal access to symbolic resources such as language, education, and confidence deepens the marginalization of female characters in the novel. While Marxist analyses typically highlight material deprivation, Bourdieu's framework exposes how cultural capital, monopolized by dominant classes, creates internalized barriers that restrict self-expression, critical thinking, and social mobility. For women like Pelageya, this deprivation is intensified by gender, leaving them doubly alienated not only from economic power but from the symbolic tools necessary for participation and resistance.

Pelageya's transformation in the novel from a submissive, voiceless widow to an active revolutionary marks not just political awakening but cultural rebirth. This study argues that her journey represents a reclaiming of symbolic power, demonstrating that liberation involves more than material change; it requires access to cultural resources that reshape identity and social perception. Furthermore, this research addresses a gap in existing scholarship, which rarely integrates feminist perspectives or intersectional frameworks into analyses of *The Mother*. By combining Bourdieu's sociology with feminist theory, the study highlights how gendered cultural deprivation reinforces silencing within working-class contexts.

Finally, the study contributes to broader debates in literary and cultural criticism by showing how interdisciplinary approaches can deepen our understanding of oppression. It emphasizes the importance of symbolic power in shaping marginalized lives and calls attention to the often-overlooked cultural dimensions of class and gender

struggles. Ultimately, it seeks to honor Pelageya Nilovna as both a revolutionary and a symbol of cultural resistance.

Significance of the Study

This study significantly expands literary criticism by shifting the focus on *The Mother* beyond its well-known Marxist and economic interpretations to include cultural and symbolic dimensions of oppression, especially concerning working-class women. While previous scholarship highlights political revolution and class struggle, this research uses Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital to reveal how lack of symbolic resources—such as education, language, and confidence—deepens Pelageya Nilovna's alienation. By integrating feminist theory, the study emphasizes how gender intensifies cultural deprivation, showing that Pelageya's transformation is not just political but symbolic: she learns to read, articulate, and participate, reclaiming agency within a patriarchal class system. This perspective enriches feminist literary criticism by illustrating how women resist not only material but also cultural silencing.

The research also holds theoretical value by applying Bourdieu's sociological concepts to proletarian literature, an underexplored area, bridging literary and sociological analysis. Pedagogically, it encourages educators to move beyond economic binaries and foster intersectional discussions on culture and gender in class analysis. Finally, the study has real-world relevance, shedding light on how cultural exclusion operates in both historical and modern contexts, advocating for strategies that address symbolic deprivation alongside material inequality. Pelageya's story thus becomes a universal symbol of cultural empowerment and the struggle for voice and recognition.

Review of Literature

The question of how symbolic and cultural resources shape individual and collective identities has increasingly become central to critical theory, feminist scholarship, and sociological studies of literature. The intersection of class, gender, and culture—especially in the lives of working-class women—has generated meaningful academic inquiry. However, there remains a significant gap in contextualizing these debates within revolutionary literary texts such as Maxim Gorky's *The Mother*. This review of literature brings together key contributions from theorists of cultural capital, feminist-Marxist thinkers, and literary critics who have examined the roles of language, representation, education, and power in shaping the identities and social locations of marginalized women. The discussion is organized under four thematic clusters: (1) Bourdieu's Cultural Capital and Symbolic Power, (2) Feminist-Marxist Critiques of Class and Gender, (3) Literary Representations of Working-Class Women, and (4) Critical Perspectives on *The Mother* and Gorky's Feminist Legacy.

1. Cultural Capital and Symbolic Power – Pierre Bourdieu and Extensions

Pierre Bourdieu's contributions to the sociology of education and power relations remain foundational for understanding the symbolic domination of marginalized groups. In his widely cited essay "The Forms of Capital", Bourdieu (1986) introduces the concept of cultural capital as a form of symbolic resource distributed unevenly across social classes. He identifies three forms of cultural capital: embodied (internal dispositions like language and confidence), objectified (books, cultural artifacts), and institutionalized (academic qualifications).

According to Bourdieu, these forms of capital reproduce class hierarchy not through force but via what he calls symbolic violence—the internalization of cultural inferiority by the oppressed themselves. This is particularly relevant in understanding Pelageya Nilovna's character in *The Mother*, who has been socialized into silence and

passivity through religious and patriarchal norms. As Bourdieu and Passeron (1977) further argue in *Reproduction in Education, Society and Culture*, educational systems validate the cultural capital of the dominant class and systematically marginalize others, especially women from working-class backgrounds.

Building upon Bourdieu's framework, Diane Reay (2004) investigates how working-class women experience institutional education and identity construction. Her findings suggest that cultural alienation often manifests as silence, self-doubt, and fear of articulation—traits that strongly align with Pelageya's early portrayal. Beverley Skeggs (1997), in her book *Formations of Class and Gender*, offers one of the most comprehensive feminist readings of Bourdieu, showing how femininity itself is a classed and gendered performance structured by access—or the lack thereof to cultural capital.

Other scholars like Lois Weis and Michelle Fine (2000) emphasize that cultural exclusion operates within micro-interactions and everyday discourses, further alienating women from marginalized communities by reinforcing what counts as “legitimate” knowledge. Similarly, Joan Scott (1999) emphasizes that cultural capital functions through symbolic systems—speech, writing, participation—which historically have excluded women.

2. Feminist-Marxist Critiques of Alienation and Culture

While Bourdieu provides a structural framework for understanding cultural inequality, feminist-Marxist theorists extend these discussions by highlighting the gendered dimensions of alienation. Karl Marx (1844) originally described alienation as a four-fold process wherein workers are estranged from their labor, the product, others, and themselves. However, feminist thinkers argue that women's alienation is more complex, as it occurs not only at the point of labor but also in reproductive and symbolic realms.

Nancy Fraser (1997), in *Justice Interruptus*, points out that cultural recognition is as vital as economic redistribution. She argues that women are often culturally misrecognized and symbolically erased, especially in revolutionary and socialist discourses that prioritize class over gender. Bell Hooks (2000) similarly emphasizes that access to language, education, and ideological tools is critical for resisting oppression, particularly for women of color and the working class.

Simone de Beauvoir (1949), in her seminal work *The Second Sex*, discusses how women are made “the Other” in cultural and symbolic narratives. She asserts that the denial of education, autonomy, and voice is central to the construction of female inferiority. These insights resonate with Pelageya Nilovna's condition in *The Mother*, where her subjugation is reinforced not only through material hardship but also by her lack of access to empowering cultural forms.

Gayatri Spivak (1988), in her influential essay *Can the Subaltern Speak?*, questions whether marginalized women can truly voice their subjectivities within dominant ideological structures. Her concern with epistemic violence aligns with Bourdieu's symbolic violence, as both suggest that even when women speak, their speech is filtered, dismissed, or appropriated.

3. Literary Representations of Working-Class Women and Cultural Marginalization

Within the realm of literary criticism, working-class women have often been underrepresented or misrepresented. Toril Moi (1991) critiques the male-centered literary canon and advocates for a feminist re-reading of texts through frameworks like

Bourdieu's, which can decode the layers of silence and symbolic exclusion. Her article *Appropriating Bourdieu* demonstrates how feminist theory can productively adapt sociological tools for literary analysis.

Julia Kristeva (1981) and Judith Butler (1990) also emphasize the role of language and discourse in constructing gender identity. They argue that voice and representation are not natural givens but are mediated by cultural access and ideological structures. In literature, women who lack narrative control often reflect deeper symbolic marginalization, which is true for Pelageya until her political awakening.

Barbara Ehrenreich (2001) and Carolyn Steedman (1986) have written extensively about the emotional and intellectual lives of working-class women. Steedman's *Landscape for a Good Woman* offers a rare glimpse into how cultural deprivation affects aspiration, emotional development, and symbolic participation. These insights provide valuable parallels to Pelageya's transformation through cultural and ideological exposure.

4. Gorky's *The Mother* and the Question of Gendered Revolution

Scholarly work on Gorky and *The Mother* has traditionally focused on the novel's revolutionary politics and its place in socialist realism. Victor Shklovsky (1919) praised Gorky's narrative for its political clarity, but criticized the lack of psychological complexity in characters. Feminist scholars, however, have begun to reassess *The Mother* as a site of gendered transformation.

Irina Paperno (1996) argues that Gorky's portrayal of Pelageya was "unintentionally feminist," as it highlighted a woman's journey from domestic silence to public articulation. Angela Livingstone (1991) goes further, suggesting that Gorky's depiction of motherhood is subversive—it aligns maternal identity with revolutionary fervor, something that challenges both patriarchal and bourgeois assumptions.

Lydia Chukovskaya, a contemporary Russian feminist writer, noted that Pelageya's journey reflects not just political indoctrination but emancipatory education, especially given that her transformation occurs through informal cultural exposure rather than institutional instruction. Stephen Hutchings (2000), in his work on Russian cultural identity, observes that Gorky's work leaves space for alternative readings of class and gender, particularly when viewed through Western critical theories.

Theoretical Framework

This study uses an interdisciplinary framework combining Karl Marx's theory of alienation and Pierre Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital to analyze the layered oppression of working-class women in *The Mother*. While Marx helps explain economic exploitation—workers' estrangement from labor, products, and human potential—Bourdieu extends this by highlighting symbolic power: the cultural, linguistic, and educational resources that shape social participation and legitimacy. Together, these frameworks show that Pelageya Nilovna's alienation is not purely economic but also cultural and symbolic.

Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital—embodied (confidence, speech), objectified (books, media), and institutionalized (degrees, credentials)—reveals how marginalized groups, especially women, are excluded from cultural participation. Pelageya lacks all three: she begins as a voiceless, submissive figure, socialized into religious fear and domestic silence. Her transformation over the novel—through exposure to revolutionary ideas, informal education, and political engagement—marks the gradual acquisition of cultural capital. This growth empowers her to resist symbolic domination, reclaim agency, and participate in revolutionary change, despite lacking

formal credentials. Bourdieu's idea of symbolic violence further explains how social hierarchies are maintained: not through overt force but through internalized norms that make the dominated accept their inferiority. Pelageya's initial passivity, fear of public speaking, and awe of male ideological clarity reflect this subtle oppression. Marx's alienation theory also illuminates her journey. While male workers face alienation at the point of production, Pelageya endures alienation in the domestic sphere—her emotional labor, cultural isolation, and lack of self-expression go unrecognized. Her political awakening mirrors a process of de-alienation: reclaiming ideological agency, emotional investment, and social belonging.

By integrating Marxist and Bourdieusian insights, this study highlights the intersection of class, culture, and gender in producing compounded alienation—and shows how cultural empowerment becomes a powerful force for resistance and transformation.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative, interpretive research methodology rooted in literary analysis and critical theory. Its goal is to explore how Pierre Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital and Karl Marx's theory of alienation apply to the experiences of working-class women in Maxim Gorky's *The Mother* (1906). By drawing on interdisciplinary perspectives—particularly sociology, feminism, and literary criticism—the research investigates how cultural deprivation, gendered alienation, and symbolic resistance are represented in the novel.

Qualitative research is well-suited for this inquiry because it focuses on interpretation, meaning, and context rather than measurable outcomes. Through close textual analysis, the study examines Gorky's portrayal of Pelageya Nilovna as a case study of how unequal access to cultural capital leads to both symbolic and material alienation. The research analyzes not only what happens in the plot but also how the narrative construct's themes of voice, identity, and resistance.

The selection of *The Mother* is intentional, as it is a foundational text in proletarian literature, often discussed in Marxist literary circles for its depiction of class struggle and revolutionary awakening. However, few studies have examined it through the lens of gendered cultural capital. Pelageya Nilovna's transformation from a submissive widow to an active revolutionary provides a powerful narrative of how working-class women reclaim voice and agency through cultural awakening, making her an ideal subject for this investigation.

The study is guided by three central research questions:

1. How does the unequal distribution of cultural capital shape Pelageya Nilovna's experiences?
2. How does Gorky depict the symbolic alienation of working-class women in *The Mother*?
3. How does the informal acquisition of cultural capital enable resistance and transformation?

To address these, the primary method used is close reading—analyzing Pelageya's speech, silences, interactions, and symbolic moments of change. Particular attention is paid to her relationship with books, political dialogue, and education, which reflect her evolving cultural capital. In addition, thematic analysis is employed to trace recurring motifs such as silence vs. voice, submission vs. resistance, and domesticity vs. public engagement. By organizing findings around these themes, the study uncovers how class and gender intersect to shape Pelageya's alienation and empowerment. The

research also integrates intertextual analysis, linking *The Mother* to key theoretical works—especially Bourdieu’s *Distinction* and *The Forms of Capital*, Marx’s *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, and feminist critiques from scholars like Bell Hooks, Nancy Fraser, Beverley Skeggs, and Toril Moi. These intertexts provide the critical scaffolding to interpret the novel as both a reflection and critique of real social inequalities.

A central component of the methodology is its intersectional approach, inspired by Kimberlé Crenshaw’s framework. Rather than treating gender and class as separate factors, the study analyzes how they intertwine to shape Pelageya’s experience, offering a more nuanced understanding of oppression and resistance. This qualitative study does not aim for generalizable conclusions but instead offers a rich, conceptual interpretation of how a literary character’s journey reflects broader social structures. By maintaining theoretical transparency, analytical rigor, and interpretive consistency, the research seeks to produce insights valuable to feminist-Marxist scholarship, literary sociology, and cultural studies.

In sum, the methodology combines close reading, thematic exploration, and intersectional theory to examine how *The Mother* portrays cultural capital as both a mechanism of oppression and a tool for revolutionary transformation.

Techniques of Data Collection

The process of collecting data for this research on *The Mother* by Maxim Gorky is grounded in qualitative methods that align with the interpretive and analytical goals of literary inquiry. In this context, data does not refer to numerical figures or statistics, but rather to textual, theoretical, and contextual evidence gathered from primary and secondary sources. The central objective is to assemble relevant and rich materials that support a critical investigation into how the unequal distribution of cultural capital leads to the alienation of working-class women, particularly as portrayed through the character of Pelageya Nilovna.

Given the nature of the research, which is anchored in the disciplines of literary studies, feminist criticism, and sociology, the techniques of data collection are primarily textual, thematic, and conceptual. This section outlines the specific strategies, tools, and sources utilized to collect data, emphasizing the importance of validity, relevance, and scholarly depth.

1. Primary Textual Source: The Novel Itself

The primary and most vital source of data is Maxim Gorky’s novel *The Mother* (1906). This fictional narrative forms the core around which all analysis and interpretation revolve. The novel was carefully read multiple times with different analytical objectives in mind. During the first reading, the focus was on gaining an overall understanding of the plot, characters, settings, and ideological framework. Subsequent readings were more focused and thematic, targeting specific dimensions of the text relevant to the study’s objectives, such as:

- Pelageya Nilovna’s language and speech patterns
- Her psychological state and social interactions
- Her exposure to political knowledge and its effects
- Her transformation across the narrative arc
- Symbolic moments of silence, resistance, or empowerment
- Male-female power dynamics and representation of education, voice, and agency

Data was manually extracted in the form of direct quotations, paraphrased scenes, and annotated themes, organized under categories like “alienation,” “cultural silence,” “embodied capital,” and “symbolic resistance.” These excerpts served as foundational evidence for thematic and critical analysis in later sections.

2. Secondary Literary and Critical Sources

In addition to the primary novel, a wide range of secondary academic sources were consulted to provide critical context, support theoretical claims, and frame the interpretation within an established scholarly tradition. These include:

- Scholarly books and peer-reviewed journal articles on *The Mother*
- Literary criticism focused on proletarian literature, socialist realism, and Gorky’s legacy
- Research on Russian literature, gender studies, and class narratives

The selection process for secondary sources followed academic credibility, relevance, and theoretical alignment. Online academic databases such as JSTOR, Project MUSE, Taylor & Francis, Springer, and Google Scholar were used extensively. Search terms included combinations like:

- "Pelageya Nilovna character analysis"
- "Feminist reading of *The Mother*"
- "Cultural capital in literature"
- "Working-class women and alienation"
- "Gorky and symbolic power"

Each selected article or book chapter was evaluated for its methodological robustness, argument clarity, and theoretical relevance.

Data Analysis

This section presents a critical and interpretive analysis of Maxim Gorky’s *The Mother*, drawing on Pierre Bourdieu’s theory of cultural capital and Karl Marx’s concept of alienation. The analysis focuses on key themes: cultural deprivation, symbolic violence, silence and voice, informal learning, and the gradual development of agency by the central character, Pelageya Nilovna. Through close reading and thematic exploration, the study reveals how unequal cultural capital sustains working-class women’s alienation and shapes their capacity for resistance.

1. Cultural Deprivation as Initial Condition

At the novel’s outset, Pelageya is portrayed as a submissive, emotionally exhausted widow who has internalized her social inferiority. She lacks embodied cultural capital—confidence, speech, and social ease—and has no access to objectified cultural capital like books or political literature. Her domestic world, shaped by religious symbols and patriarchal expectations, reflects cultural isolation. In Marxist terms, Pelageya is alienated from her identity, labor, and community; in Bourdieusian terms, she is excluded from symbolic power networks and lacks the cultural tools that could help her question her condition.

2. Symbolic Violence and Internalized Silence

Pelageya’s silence symbolizes her deep internalization of inferiority, explained by Bourdieu’s concept of symbolic violence—the acceptance of domination as natural. She defers to male authority, whether her abusive husband or later her revolutionary son, Pavel. She hesitates to ask questions or engage in political discussions, feeling unqualified and voiceless. Religion reinforces this passivity, conditioning her to pray and repent rather than resist. Thus, her alienation is not only economic but also cultural

and gendered, as she embodies both proletarian oppression and the moral burden placed on women.

3. Informal Learning and Cultural Awakening

A major turning point in Pelageya's journey comes through informal exposure to cultural capital. By observing Pavel and his comrades, she slowly absorbs revolutionary ideas and language, even without formal education. This process reshapes her habitus, as she internalizes the ethos of collective resistance. A key shift occurs when she begins distributing illegal pamphlets and engaging in political tasks—signs of embodied cultural capital. Her growing confidence and sense of purpose mark a gradual reversal of symbolic violence; she no longer accepts silence as natural but starts asserting her political voice.

4. Language and Speech as Tools of Agency

Language plays a crucial role in Pelageya's transformation. Initially hesitant and unsure, her speech gradually becomes more assertive and emotionally charged as she aligns with the revolutionary cause. Gorky uses her dialogue to signal empowerment—when she persuades workers or speaks in public, she moves beyond her identity as a mere mother or widow to become a symbol of collective struggle. Bourdieu's insight that language is a form of social positioning is key here: by mastering revolutionary discourse, Pelageya gains visibility and symbolic power.

5. Resistance and Overcoming Alienation

Pelageya's final development as a revolutionary courier and agitator marks her full political awakening. She not only carries messages but inspires others, embodying maternal strength and ideological commitment. In Marxist terms, she reverses her alienation by reconnecting with her community and purpose; her life gains meaning beyond domesticity or religious submission. Though her journey is not free of fear or doubt, it illustrates that alienation can be challenged when individuals access cultural resources and collective support.

Findings

This study's analysis of Maxim Gorky's *The Mother* using Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital and Marx's theory of alienation reveals several key insights about the marginalization of working-class women and the pathways to resistance.

First, the novel shows that cultural capital is unequally distributed not only by class but also by gender. While both working-class men and women are excluded from dominant power structures, women like Pelageya Nilovna face added symbolic barriers, lacking formal education, confidence, and access to cultural resources.

Second, Pelageya's alienation is not only economic but also emotional and symbolic. Her silence, self-doubt, and internalized submission illustrate Bourdieu's concept of symbolic violence—how dominated individuals unconsciously accept their marginality. This alienation is deeply tied to her lack of cultural capital.

Third, informal education plays a transformative role. Pelageya gains exposure to revolutionary ideas and political vocabulary not through formal schooling but by observing and engaging with her son Pavel's activist circle. Gradually, she moves from passive observer to active participant, showing that cultural capital can be acquired outside traditional institutions.

Fourth, speech emerges as a central marker of empowerment. As Pelageya's political consciousness grows, her speech becomes more confident, signaling her shift from marginality to agency.

Finally, the study finds that motherhood, initially a site of confinement, is redefined as a revolutionary force. Through maternal commitment, Pelageya channels caregiving into political action, illustrating that symbolic empowerment and resistance require access to ideological tools, supportive networks, and cultural resources.

Conclusion

Maxim Gorky's *The Mother* offers a profound exploration of how revolutionary transformation is not solely an economic or political struggle but also a cultural and symbolic one. Through the character of Pelageya Nilovna, the novel highlights how the systematic denial of cultural capital—access to language, knowledge, and ideological tools—deepens the alienation of working-class women. Pelageya's journey from a submissive, silenced widow to an empowered political agent demonstrates that informal learning, exposure to revolutionary discourse, and participation in collective action are vital for overcoming symbolic exclusion.

This study emphasizes that true social change requires addressing both material inequalities and the hidden structures of symbolic power that dictate who is heard, valued, and included. Pelageya's transformation shows that cultural capital can be acquired outside formal institutions and that such symbolic empowerment can play a decisive role in resistance movements. Her story challenges traditional portrayals of motherhood, reframing it not as a passive or sacrificial role but as a source of revolutionary strength.

Ultimately, *The Mother* reminds us that meaningful equality demands not only economic redistribution but also cultural access, ideological inclusion, and the amplification of silenced voices—making the struggle for justice a deeply symbolic as well as material fight.

Recommendations

This study suggests several key directions for both academic and practical application. First, there is a need to revisit proletarian literature, like *The Mother*, through the combined lenses of cultural theory and gender theory to better understand how class and gender intersect in shaping symbolic lives. Second, feminist-Marxist curricula should integrate the concept of cultural capital to highlight how women's oppression operates not only economically but also culturally. Third, educational initiatives should promote informal learning models that empower working-class women outside formal institutions, recognizing the transformative potential of grassroots education. Fourth, literary criticism should intentionally foreground the symbolic lives and internal struggles of working-class women, rather than reducing them to background figures. Fifth, programs that focus on speech—such as writing workshops, dialogue circles, and storytelling projects—can be powerful tools to amplify marginalized voices. Lastly, policymakers should work to democratize access to cultural resources, ensuring public libraries, discourse spaces, and educational platforms are accessible to all.

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