

When Justice Fails: Class Struggle and Violence in Kendrick Lamar's *XXX.* through a Marxist Lens

Joice Anita Siburian, Prof. Dr. Dra. T. Thyrhaya Zein M.A., Yulia Rahma Silalahi, Priskila Anggi Marpaung, Rolan Siallagan, Yosia Situmorang

joiceanita@students.usu.ac.id, t.thyrhaya@usu.ac.id, yuliarahma@students.usu.ac.id, priskilaanggi@students.usu.ac.id, rolandasma@students.usu.ac.id, yosiasaad@students.usu.ac.id

English Litratue, Cultural Science, Universitas Sumatera Utara

ABSTRACT

This study examines Kendrick Lamar's song *XXX.* from the album *DAMN.* (2017) through a Marxist literary perspective to explore the representation of class struggle, violence, and social inequality in contemporary hip-hop music. While previous studies have primarily focused on race and identity in hip-hop, limited attention has been given to the intersection of social class and violence within specific musical texts. Using a qualitative research design, the study analyzes selected lyrics as cultural texts that reflect power relations, ideology, and institutional failure. The findings reveal that violence in *XXX.* is portrayed not merely as an individual reaction but as a consequence of structural inequality, limited access to justice, and class oppression. Furthermore, the song exposes ideological contradictions within capitalist society and critiques the failure of institutions to protect marginalized communities. The study concludes that hip-hop functions as an influential medium of social criticism, highlighting systemic injustice and the need for greater social equity and institutional accountability.

Keywords: Marxism, class struggle, social inequality, violence, ideology, hip-hop, Kendrick Lamar, *XXX.*, systemic injustice.

INTRODUCTION

Literary works do not come into being without reason; rather, they grow out of social experiences, historical struggles, and how people interpret life within their environments. Literary works are often understood as cultural texts that reflect social realities, including power relations, injustice, collective experiences, and historical developments within society. Based on this, the literary work most frequently used as a voice to critique something is poetry created in the form of musicalization, commonly known as a song. These songs are created through meaningful strings of words combined with rhythm to produce a melody that evokes a certain atmosphere. On the other hand, songs also give rise to genres designed to convey the song's message through specific melodies and rhythms. Referring to literary works as a voice for criticism, the genres most frequently used are rap and hip-hop. Rap and hip-hop can be interpreted as forms of oral literary expression,

as both contain elements of narrative, rhythm, symbolism, and sharp social criticism. Thus, song lyrics serve not only as entertainment but also as a medium for conveying worldviews and responses to social reality (Ramadhan, 2023).

In light of this context, this study will examine rap and hip-hop music that addresses social issues. One of the musical works to be examined in this paper is by an American rapper named Kendrick Lamar. Kendrick Lamar plays a significant role as an artist who consistently addresses issues of race, social class, and social violence in his work. The album *DAMN.*, released in 2017, demonstrates how personal experiences can be transformed into broader social reflections. Lamar's work is also frequently interpreted as a representation of hip-hop culture's continuing role in challenging social inequality and amplifying the voices of marginalized communities (Ramadhan, 2023). Consequently, Lamar is viewed not only as a

rapper but also as a cultural voice in contemporary American society. Among the songs on the album, *XXX* stands out as one of the most notable tracks for its complex layers of meaning regarding violence, fear, and the paradoxes of social life. This song goes beyond emotional expression; rather, it opens up a space to examine how the injustices created by the government shape the experiences of every individual in society. Through its lyrics and narrative structure, *XXX* illustrates the connection between personal experiences and broader social conditions, particularly the relationship between individual identity, institutional authority, and systems of power (Sarkar, 2023).

An analysis of *XXX* is important because this work demonstrates that popular music can also serve as social criticism not only for being listened or even for getting popularity. On the other hand, it illustrates how the hip-hop genre has, in many ways, evolved into a space closely tied to the experiences of the Black community, particularly in voicing injustice, resistance, and the realities of life under the pressure of an unequal system. Therefore, understanding the meaning of the song *XXX* also means understanding that violence does not occur on its own or without the involvement of a party, as it is always closely tied to the underlying social structures (Taylor and Corbin, 2026). Through this study, it has become evident that song lyrics can serve as a gateway to understanding how inequality operates in everyday life.

This study employs a Marxist perspective as a theoretical framework for analyzing the song *XXX*. In Marxist analysis, the key concepts frequently utilized are the relationships between social class, power, and economic structures that shape societal life. In contemporary scholarship, Marxism is understood not only as a classical economic theory but also as a critical approach to interpreting culture, including music and popular texts. Recent studies indicate that inequality within the modern capitalist system

remains a central issue influencing cultural production as well as social representation in the media (United Nations, 2021). The concept of class struggle introduced by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels remains a crucial foundation in contemporary social analysis. Contemporary studies suggest that class inequality is represented not only through economic relations but also through cultural expressions, including hip-hop music, which frequently portrays the experiences of marginalized communities (Ramadhan, 2023).

Furthermore, the concept of ideology in the Marxist approach helps explain how power operates indirectly through culture. In observable reality, ideology often takes the form of narratives and representations that appear natural, making it difficult to recognize as a form of domination. Scholars have argued that cultural texts, including music, may function both as instruments that reproduce dominant ideologies and as platforms through which those ideologies can be challenged and critiqued (Althusser, 2008; Sarkar, 2023). In this regard, hip-hop occupies a unique position because it is not only part of the cultural industry but also functions as a medium for critiquing systems that perpetuate inequality effectively (Taylor and Corbin, 2026). On the other hand, the relevance of the Marxist approach can also be seen in the issue of global inequality, which remains a concern to this day. A report from the United Nations indicates that social and economic inequality remains a major challenge in the development of modern societies, particularly regarding the distribution of resources and access to justice (United Nations, 2021). This perspective aligns with the Marxist view that the capitalist system tends to maintain the dominance of certain groups. Therefore, an analysis of works such as *XXX* is important because it can reveal how such injustices are represented in the form of personal experiences and cultural narratives.

Based on this background, this study aims to analyze how *XXX* represents class struggle and violence in a capitalist society through a Marxist perspective. This study also seeks to

demonstrate that violence in songs is not merely an emotional expression but reflects the failure of social structures to deliver justice. Thus, this study is expected to contribute to understanding the relationship between popular culture, social inequality, and criticism of the underlying system. On the other hand, this study is also aligned with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly SDG 10 on reducing inequality and SDG 16 on peace, justice, and strong institutions, as both emphasize that inequality can lead to marginalization, while equitable access to justice is a crucial prerequisite for a more equitable society. Thus, this research is expected to contribute to literary studies, cultural studies, and social criticism through a more sensitive reading of class relations and violence.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Music, particularly the hip-hop genre, has long played a vital role as a powerful medium for expressing social criticism and exposing social injustices within society. As a cultural product emerging from marginalized communities, hip-hop reflects life experiences related to class struggle, racial and identity-based discrimination, and institutional violence. Hip-hop lyrics serve not only as a form of individual expression but also as a means to challenge dominant ideologies and existing power structures. In this context, the works of Kendrick Lamar, particularly the song *XXX.*, illustrate how contemporary music can engage deeply with issues of justice, morality, and social conflict. This study adopts a Marxist perspective grounded in the ideas of Karl Marx. Marxist theory highlights the conflict between the bourgeoisie (the ruling class) and the proletariat (the working class), and views social inequality as a structural outcome of the capitalist system. Key concepts such as class struggle, alienation, and ideology are used to explain how dominant systems maintain and justify various forms of oppression in society.

In literary and cultural studies, Marxist criticism is widely used as an analytical framework for examining the representation of socioeconomic conditions and power relations in cultural texts. Cultural products, including music, are understood as reflections of material reality shaped by the economic system and dominant ideologies. According to (Lee, 2025), hip-hop emerged as a response to social inequality and marginalization and serves as a medium for critiquing oppressive systems. The study indicates that hip-hop lyrics often represent the lived experiences of marginalized groups while highlighting existing social and economic disparities. On the other hand, (Peng, 2024) also explains that hip-hop functions not only as a form of cultural expression but also as a medium that reflects and influences social movements, particularly within the context of the struggle for Black rights. In this regard, it can be concluded that hip-hop serves as a platform for artists to voice resistance against structural violence, racism, and systemic injustice, while simultaneously fostering collective awareness among its listeners.

From a cultural perspective, (Ramadhan, 2023) emphasizes that hip-hop is a form of subculture that represents marginalized identities and simultaneously functions as a form of resistance against the dominant culture. This perspective aligns with the Marxist view of culture as an arena of ideological struggle between dominant and subordinate groups. Furthermore, Kendrick Lamar's music is widely recognized for addressing themes of institutional racism, economic inequality, violence, and social injustice. His lyrics frequently portray the experiences of marginalized communities while exposing contradictions within contemporary American society (Sarkar, 2023). His works depict the lived experiences of marginalized communities while revealing the moral complexities individuals face within an unjust social system in society.

Based on the reviewed literature, it can be observed that hip-hop consistently functions as

a medium of social critique that reflects structural inequalities in society. In support of this, the Marxist approach employed will provide an analytical framework that allows for a deeper understanding of how cultural products not only reflect social reality but also reveal the underlying power relations.

On the other hand, previous research has generally agreed that hip-hop serves as a voice for marginalized groups. However, most studies tend to focus primarily on issues of race and identity. In other words, research specifically examining the relationship between social class and depictions of violence in certain works, particularly Kendrick Lamar's album *XXX.*, remains very limited. Consequently, there is a significant gap in understanding how structural injustice, social class, and violence intersect within this cultural context. Overall, the reviewed literature indicates that hip-hop is a powerful form of cultural expression that plays a crucial role in critiquing social and economic inequality. However, research examining the relationship between class issues and violence in specific works remains very limited. Therefore, this study aims to bridge this gap by using a Marxist theoretical framework to analyze the representations of class struggle and violence in this song by Kendrick Lamar. This study is expected to contribute to the broader discourse on music as a vehicle for social critique and deepen our understanding of how modern hip-hop reflects social injustice.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employs a qualitative research design, as it focuses on interpreting the meanings embedded in cultural texts rather than on measuring numerical data. This methodological approach is considered appropriate, as it is highly relevant to the study's objective: to explore how class struggle and violence are represented in Kendrick Lamar's song "XXX" through a Marxist perspective. The primary data source

for this study is the lyrics of the song "XXX" from the album *DAMN.* (2017). These lyrics are treated as a form of literary text that reflects social reality, ideological structures, and power relations. Additionally, secondary data were obtained from books, journal articles, and relevant previous studies related to Marxism, hip-hop culture, and social criticism in music. These sources are used to support the interpretation and strengthen the analytical framework. On the other hand, the data collection method used in this study is documentation. The author collected song lyrics from verified sources and analyzed them carefully by identifying key words, phrases, and lines that indicate themes of violence, power, and class struggle. Next, the selected data will be categorized based on its relevance to key Marxist concepts such as class conflict, ideology, and social inequality.

In analyzing the data, this study employs a Marxist analytical approach. To achieve the best possible results, the analysis was conducted in several steps: 1) reading the lyrics repeatedly to gain a comprehensive understanding of their overall meaning, 2) selecting and coding relevant excerpts according to thematic categories related to class struggle, violence, and ideology, 3) interpreting these excerpts using Marxist theory to reveal how the song represents social inequality and the influence of capitalist structures on individual experiences, and 4) connecting the findings to a broader social context to demonstrate how the song functions as a form of social critique. Finally, to ensure the validity of the analysis, this study employs theoretical triangulation by comparing these findings with established Marxist theories and previous scholarly research. In other words, using this approach helps the author strengthen the credibility of the interpretation and ensure that the analysis is grounded in relevant academic theory.

FINDINGS & DISCUSSION

This study examines the song XXX. by Kendrick Lamar through a Marxist framework, focusing on class struggle, social inequality, and systemic injustice. The analysis reveals that the song not only reflects individual experiences of grief and anger but also exposes broader structural problems related to inequality, institutional failure, and ideological control within capitalist society.

To support the analysis, selected lyrics are categorized and interpreted using a Marxist perspective, as presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Representation of Class Struggle, Violence, and Social Inequality in Kendrick Lamar’s XXX.: A Marxist Analysis

No.	Lyrics Excerpt	Category	Marxist Concept	Interpretation
1	“Somebody killed his son, now he’s slippin’ in a rage”	Violence & Injustice	Class Oppression	These lyrics depict how the picture of personal suffering arises from social conditions in which marginalized individuals experience limited access to justice. In this case, structural inequality is reflected through emotional reactions that reinforce feelings of helplessness and anger.
2	“If somebody	Revenge	Material Conditions	In this lyric,

dy kills my son, that means somebody’s getting killed”				violence is depicted as a response to social reality shaped by inequality and institutional failure. The use of cause-and-effect words (If and that means) shows how the lyric has an implicit meaning that portrays an individual’s reaction who might seek personal revenge when the formal justice system seems ineffective.
3 “It’s America, God bless you if it’s good to you”	Ideology	False Consciousness		The lyrics seem to question the dominant ideology of equal opportunity by suggesting that social benefits are distributed unevenly. These lyrics reveal the contradiction between national

				ideals and the lived experiences of marginalized groups.
4	<i>"I'll chip a nigga, then throw the blower in his lap"</i>	Moral Conflict	Ideological Contradiction	The lyrics depict the tension between moral values and survival in a society that appears unequal. Indirectly, this reflects how oppressive social conditions can influence the choices of an individual and ethical judgment.
5	<i>"America's reflections of me, that's what a mirror does"</i>	Class Consciousness	Ideology & Social Structure	These lyrics show that a person's experiences are shaped by broader social realities. From a Marxist perspective, these lyrics highlight the relationship between personal identity and systemic inequality.

1. Justice as an Instrument of Class Power

From a Marxist perspective, the state and its legal institutions do not operate as neutral systems that guarantee justice equally for all individuals. Instead, they function as mechanisms that preserve the interests of the ruling class and maintain existing power structures (Marx and Engels, 2002). This theoretical framework helps explain why access to justice is often unequal, particularly for marginalized groups. In XXX., this condition is clearly reflected through the absence of institutional involvement following a personal tragedy. The lyric *"Somebody killed his son, now he's slippin' in a rage"* illustrates how grief transforms into anger without any indication that the individual seeks help from legal authorities. The lack of reference to police or judicial processes suggests a deep distrust of institutional systems.

This distrust is not merely personal but reflects a broader social reality in which marginalized communities often perceive the legal system as inaccessible or ineffective. As (Marx and Engels, 2002) argue, the state primarily serves to reinforce class relations, which results in unequal access to justice. Therefore, the song highlights how justice is not universally experienced but is shaped by class position. The absence of institutional trust ultimately pushes individuals toward alternative, often violent, forms of justice.

2. Violence as a Product of Social Inequality

(Marx, 1977) emphasizes that human behavior is shaped by material and social conditions rather than purely individual choices. In this context, violence in XXX. should not be interpreted as an isolated moral failure but as a response to structural inequality. The lyric *"If somebody kill my son, that mean somebody gettin' killed"* presents violence as a direct and almost inevitable reaction. The conditional structure of the sentence suggests that violence is perceived as a logical consequence of injustice. This reflects how individuals who lack access to institutional justice may feel compelled to take

matters into their own hands. Moreover, the emotional progression within the song, from calm reflection to intense anger, demonstrates how social pressure can influence behavior. The inability to rely on institutional systems creates frustration, which can escalate into aggression. According to (Marx, 1977), such responses are shaped by material realities, including inequality and lack of resources. Thus, violence in the song can be understood as a structural outcome rather than a purely personal decision. It represents the contradictions within capitalist society, where inequality produces conditions that lead to conflict and instability.

3. Ideology and Social Contradiction

In Marxist theory, ideology plays a crucial role in maintaining power structures by shaping how individuals perceive reality. (Althusser, 2008) further explains that ideology operates through cultural forms and institutions to reproduce social relations and reinforce dominant power. This concept is evident in the lyric *"It's America, God bless you if it's good to you."* On the surface, this statement reflects a sense of national pride and shared identity. However, the conditional phrase *"if it's good to you"* introduces a contradiction, suggesting that the benefits of society are not equally distributed.

This contradiction reflects the concept of false consciousness, where individuals are encouraged to believe in fairness and equality despite experiencing inequality (Marx, 1977). At the same time, it aligns with (Althusser, 2008) that ideology functions to legitimize existing power structures by presenting them as natural or inevitable. Through this line, the song exposes the gap between ideological narratives and lived experiences. It reveals that the promise of equality often serves to mask structural inequalities, allowing the system to maintain its legitimacy despite its flaws.

4. Moral Conflict under Social Pressure

Another important aspect of the song is the presence of moral conflict, particularly in the tension between ethical values and violent impulses. This is illustrated in the line *"I'll*

chip a nigga, then throw the blower in his lap," which reflects a moment where moral restraint is abandoned. This shift highlights how individuals may struggle to maintain ethical principles when faced with extreme emotional and social pressure. Initially, the narrative suggests an awareness of moral and possibly religious values. However, these values are challenged when the individual is confronted with injustice and personal loss. From a Marxist perspective, this transformation demonstrates how material conditions influence human consciousness. As (Marx, 1977) argues, ideas and beliefs are shaped by social reality. In situations where individuals experience inequality and trauma, moral values may be overridden by the need for survival or emotional response. Therefore, the internal conflict depicted in the song reflects broader ideological contradictions within society. It shows how individuals navigate competing values in environments shaped by inequality and injustice.

5. Class Consciousness and Social Reflection

Another important lyric that states, *"America's reflection on me, that's what mirrors do,"* shows that individual experience cannot be separated from broader social conditions. This statement is supported by Marxist theory, which emphasizes that personal identity is shaped by material realities and class relations. On the other hand, through this lyric, it shows how Lamar implies that his experience reflects the contradictions of American society itself. As a result, the song transforms the personal narrative into a critique of a larger system of inequality, urging listeners to recognize the connection between individual suffering and structural injustice.

6. Relevance to Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

The issues presented in XXX. are closely related to **SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities)** and **SDG 16 (Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions)**. These goals emphasize the importance of reducing inequality and ensuring access to justice as fundamental

components of sustainable development. The song illustrates how inequality and weak institutions contribute to violence and social instability. When justice is not accessible to all individuals, conflict becomes more likely. This reflects global concerns regarding inequality and institutional effectiveness (United Nations, 2021). Furthermore, SDG 16 highlights the need for inclusive and accountable institutions. The absence of such institutions in the song demonstrates the consequences of institutional failure. Without structural improvements, achieving peace and justice remains difficult. Therefore, the song serves as a critical reflection on the importance of addressing inequality and strengthening institutions in order to achieve sustainable development.

CONCLUSION

This study shows that Kendrick Lamar's song, XXX., is more than just a song about personal emotions like anger or sadness. Essentially, the analysis results have shown how this song functions as a powerful commentary on systemic inequality in capitalist society. Using a Marxist perspective, the song has demonstrated that violence is not just an individual choice but is indirectly a response shaped by social disparities, limited justice, and institutional shortcomings themselves. On the other hand, findings that analyzed several lyrics in the song XXX have shown that legal institutions and the government are often regarded as untrustworthy or difficult to access, especially for marginalized communities. For these reasons, this distrust seems to drive individuals to seek alternative forms of justice, which are often reacted to through violence. In this context, violence functions as a social signal to react and seek protection rather than merely as a moral failure. At the same time, the lyrics of the song XXX also often reveal ideological contradictions, where society's ideals of equality and justice often seem to be promoted but in reality, they are not experienced equally by everyone. In this context, a concept of false

consciousness can be illustrated, where dominant beliefs obscure inequality. Furthermore, this study highlights how economic conditions and social pressures are among the reasons that can influence moral judgment. When facing injustice and personal loss, individuals unconsciously struggle to maintain their ethical standards, leading to internal conflict and, in some cases, violent responses. In the end, the cycle that has been formed ultimately enables both individuals and society to maintain class oppression, and continues to generate inequality and ongoing violence. Overall, this work asserts that hip-hop, particularly Kendrick Lamar's music, plays an important role in social critique. In the song XXX, the lyrics clearly show how cultural expression can reveal fundamental structural issues related to power, inequality, and justice. In the end, it can be concluded that XXX, with lyrics that feature several words and phrases regarding systems and governance, is developing an implied meaning that also provides input in addressing issues of violence and class. In this case, without taking one side, Lamar, who seems to observe from another perspective by trying to understand the situation, shows that addressing these problems requires not only individual awareness but also systemic reform that promotes justice, strengthens institutions, and ensures equal access to justice for everyone.

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