

Alienation in the Game of Chance Under Capitalism

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Abstract

Alienation is a universal theme in literature. The game of chance or gambling under capitalism can produce a hostile social setting for those who are unaware of its negative impacts. In such a social milieu, people can experience feelings of alienation, failing to make their lives their own. This paper analyzes the theme of alienation in the game of chance under capitalism in two stories written by S.E.A. Write Awardees, *The Lottery of Karma* by Chanthi Deuanesavanh and *Lottery* by Catherine Lim, through the lens of literary devices. The social settings of these stories are two countries in Southeast Asia, and these two writers set their stories in their own respective countries, Lao PDR and the Republic of Singapore. It finds that, in their exposure to such social settings, the protagonists are beset by a sense of alienation regardless of whether they perform their roles as laborers, capitalists, or consumers.

Keywords

alienation – gambling – capitalism – S.E.A. Write Award – Chanthi Deuanesavanh – Catherine Lim

1 Introduction

People of former generations often tell their descendants that they should work hard to earn money, which they can then spend on products and services, or which they can invest to make even more money. These messages have

become our models and myths. People work hard in order to earn money, hoping that one day they might have the comforts that money can offer. Capitalism or the free-market system is said to be an economic system allowing people to accumulate the wealth they crave. Many believe that this system is the most effective way to organize production and distribution that human beings have created (Rajan and Zingales 2003, 1). According to Guttman (1994, xvii), there is probably no more powerful motivating force other than love and fear in our lives than what money offers. In relation to this point, Needleman (1991, 40–41) points out that the outward expenditure of humanity's energy now takes place in and through money. Therefore, if one wishes to understand life, one must understand money in this present phase of history and civilization.

Money circulation under capitalism involves a set of persons who perform different roles according to a set of rules. Robbins (2005) points out that the culture of capitalism encourages the conversion of items and activities which have no monetary worth but are valuable or necessary in other ways into commodities that can be bought or sold in the marketplace. To keep the economic system working and to maintain economic growth, there must be interactions. Robbins (2005) uses a highly simplified model to conceptualize this economic system as sets of relations which are based on three parties, i.e., laborers, capitalists, and consumers, under the supervision of the nation-state. In this cultural context, the nation-state has several functions, several of which are: serving as a mediator, controlling the creation and flow of money, and formulating and imposing the rules of interactions. Meanwhile, laborers are encouraged to accumulate wages, capitalists to accumulate profit, and consumers to accumulate and consume goods.

Gambling exists in most capitalist countries; however, it is not always good. This ancient human activity exists in most cultures and in most parts of the world (Custer and Milt 1985). A number of capitalist countries allow their citizens to participate in gambling. And in some countries, gambling is one of the most popular leisure activities. However, gambling is a concerning issue, as it can cause harm, especially among the vulnerable groups in society. These people can earn too little from their labor, gain too little from their small capital investment, and have too little means to consume freely. Therefore, they may place their hopes in games of chance to gain a lump sum of money, which they hope will provide them with financial freedom. However, this desired outcome often reveals itself to be an illusion. Tales of gamblers losing some, most or all of their money in the game have often been heard. In addition, participating in gambling prevents individuals from attaining real freedom in a world in which one can act in a self-determined manner and understand oneself as the

master of one's own actions. The delusion that gamblers may suffer from can be described as alienation.

The term 'alienation' involves several differing dimensions. The narrow sense of this term is defined by Karl Marx, who speaks about class societies and sees the roots of alienation lying mainly in capitalist society. According to Marx (cited in Marković 1989, 66), the basic meaning of this term is that human beings are actually not what they potentially could be. For Marx, the loss of basic human identity is manifested in several dimensions. The first dimension of alienation is the loss of control over the products of human activity. The second is the pathological character of social relationships so that emotions or attitudes such as envy, competitiveness, mistrust, hatred, and hostility replace possible collaboration, meaningful communication, and concern for the satisfaction of the needs of others. The third dimension is the waste of potential for creative activity. The fourth is the loss of self-identity, or an inner split into parts that are alien to each other. The last dimension is alienation of humans from nature.

Apart from Marx, the account of alienation is discussed by other writers. According to the editors of *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (2021), the idea of alienation is an ambiguous concept, and its most common variants are as follows: (1) powerlessness, or the feeling that one's life is not under one's control but is determined by external forces; (2) meaninglessness, or the lack of comprehension in one's own actions or a sense of purposelessness in one's life; (3) normlessness, referring to the lack of commitment to shared social conventions of behaviour; (4) cultural estrangement, or the sense of removal from established values in society; (5) social isolation, or the sense of loneliness or exclusion in social relations; and (6) self-estrangement – the understanding that the individual is out of touch with himself in one way or another. Golubović (1989, 99) says that the term 'alienation' is understood as a state of disturbance of what one might feel as a normal life situation, wherein certain fundamental human needs are blocked, and relationships are replaced by formalized links and estranged communications. Schmitt (2018, 4–5) broadly defines an alienated person as one whose life seems to be without meaning, who lacks a definite identity, and who has no reasons for his own actions. For Schmitt, alienation is not the same as unhappiness although alienation entails unhappiness or suffering, and this term cannot be applied to describe a person who leads his life deliberately and without self-deception and is likely to experience suffering. Therefore, alienation should not be confused with sadness or depression. That is to say, the term 'alienation' cannot be easily defined, for it involves several different dimensions. For our discussion, this term is used in a very general sense to mean the act through which an individual becomes alien

or strange to something or somebody else, including oneself. In other words, the concept of alienation concerns itself with failure to make one's life one's own and establish relations with others.

Alienation is a major problem in an alienated society. Rousseau (cited in Schmitt 2018, 23) points out that alienation arises more readily in some social settings than in others; therefore, alienation is a social ill connected to particular societies. Materialism in some societies, fueled by marketing, is said to be responsible for people's alienation. In it, the material possessions one owns are defined as socially acceptable and one needs material possessions to be viewed as a member of society. Pollay (1986, 25) points out that the preoccupation with acquiring and owning goods has the social effect of displacing affect from people to objects and an alienating effect where the self is perceived as an exchange commodity. In the same respect, Leiss (1976) explains that the transfer of feeling toward goods and away from people, the reification of abstract meaning into objects, and the simultaneous objectification of personal relations, are manifestations of this materialism. Instead of being able to say, "I am what I do," people are reduced to saying of themselves, "I am what I have," thus providing a direct link between the search for the self and the consumption process in industrial societies (Kilbourne 1987, 229). In other words, this pervasive social condition constitutes one aspect of alienation. Thus, the subjective experience of alienation should be discussed both as a set of social structures and as a range of pervasive emotions.

The concept of alienation can be applied to analyze the inner lives of individuals who are exposed to games of chance in a capitalist setting. As mentioned previously, individuals in this economic structure play three roles: laborers, capitalists, and consumers. Among the three roles, only laborers perform productive activities to earn money. To understand the feeling of alienation experienced by laborers, we can view it by using Marx's account of alienation, which includes not only the laborer's working conditions but also the feeling of alienation that this economic structure evokes (Schmitt 2018, viii). According to Mikics (2007), Marx theorized that capitalism puts laborers in a position where their ability to give some coherence and meaning to their lives is seriously reduced. When laborers sell their labor to employers, they acknowledge that their bodily and mental capacities have been rented by their bosses. Thus, they become alienated from the products of their own labor, for they are unable to identify themselves with these products. Allen (2017, 44) notes that in Marx's account of alienation, although individuals are free to choose how to sell their labor in the free market, some people end up doing menial jobs merely for the sake of wages. For these people, work is just a means to an end; it does not support the life energy of the workers but takes

them outside of themselves. During working time, their labor is no longer voluntary, but coerced. Their work has no element of spontaneous creativity and the workers feel no compulsion to produce. This phenomenon explains why weekends and holidays are thought of as free time. Schmitt (2018, viii) says that Marx's account of alienation tells us that the emotions with which we respond to the structure of a worker's situation are barely under control.

Unlike the laborers, capitalists and consumers do not perform productive activities. Still, they are affected by this cultural scheme. The former use money for investment, hoping for a positive return, and the latter for consumption. It is clear that capitalists take some risks. Their inner lives as capitalists, while managing risks and waiting for profit, are not always free from expectation, tension, and anxiety. Likewise, consumers are not always carefree, for the patterns of consumption are determined by financial means and social significance. This can disturb the ways that capitalists and consumers establish relations to themselves, something important for themselves and the world. Jaeggi's (2014) conception of 'alienation' is perhaps the most closely associated with the psychological conditions of capitalists and consumers. For Jaeggi, the term 'alienation' refers to indifference and internal division, powerlessness, and relationlessness with respect to oneself and the world in which one lives. This term also suggests the inability to establish relations to other human beings, things, social institutions, and the world. In addition, it embraces the concept of a distorted relation to oneself, to one's world, a failure to properly appropriate oneself or the world, or to make oneself or the world one's own, and a failure to realize one's potential. The crucial part of this concept is that one becomes a stranger to oneself, unable to experience oneself as an active subject.

In recognition of the negative effects of gambling under capitalism on an individual's inner life, two short stories by writers from Southeast Asia reveal stories of people who are exposed to gambling within their respective countries. These two stories are *The Lottery of Karma* by Chanthi Deuanesavanh¹ (2001), translated by Malithat Promathatavedi and Suwanna Kriengkraipetch, and *Lottery* by Catherine Lim² (1992). The protagonists in the respective stories are portrayed as helpless victims in the face of the social ill which befalls them. It is worth mentioning that both writers are S.E.A. Write Awardees. Also noteworthy is the fact that the former work reveals experiences of gamblers in Laos, officially the Lao People's Democratic Republic (Lao PDR), and the latter

1 He won a S.E.A. Write Award in 1999 for the short story *The Lottery of Karma*.

2 She received a S.E.A. Write Award in 1999 for the short story *Great-grandfather with Teeth*. Lim and Deuanesavanh won the S.E.A. Write Awards in the same year.

in the Republic of Singapore. These two countries are capitalistic societies in which gambling is widespread although the socioeconomic conditions of Laos and Singapore are obviously different as discussed next.

Laos is one of the least-developed and poorest countries in Southeast Asia (Ardrey IV, Shultz II, and Keane 2015). Since the late twentieth century, Laos has undergone an economic transformation, leaving socialism behind. Askew, Long, and Logan (2007, 176) point out that this country embarked on a process of market reform and economic liberalization that was, by the 1990s, to leave it a socialist country in name only. Moreover, Laos has created a free market and private ownership to support capitalism (Radetzki 1994). Laos has become embedded in the global economy and increasingly exposed to a wider range of people, companies, products, brands, and media that promote consumption and construct the desire for material possessions. Subsequently, Lao people have embraced materialism and consumer culture to the extent that their consumer behaviors have changed (Ardrey IV et al. 2015). Accompanied by the economic transformation is the embrace of gambling. In Lao culture, gambling for money is widespread and acceptable to the extent that the organization of lottery drawings has been held widely outside the control of the government (Zuckerman 2018, 452). This reality is reflected in Deuanesavanh's *The Lottery of Karma* (2001).

Singapore has become a modern country with a highly developed market economy. In the decade after independence in 1965, the country developed from a low-income country to a high-income country (The World Bank 2019). This country has been characterized as a progressive, wealthy society with good prospects (Wirtz and Chung 2015). However, its economic development does not equally benefit all Singaporean citizens. Singapore has a problem of income inequality like other rich nations (Hofmann 2018). This problem leads to price distortion which can push low-income families into poverty (Dhamani 2008). Due to rapid changes and increasing demands in Singapore, many have resorted to gambling as an alternative way to make it in life (Online Gambling Therapy Support Groups 2020). Gambling is widely available in several forms, such as lotteries, sports betting, off-track horse racing, and casino games. A significant number of Singaporeans engage in gambling as a leisure activity (KMT et al. 2011). In addition, gambling in the city-state has become somewhat of a cultural norm (The Cabin Singapore 2020). Catherine Lim has written a story entitled *Lottery* (1992) to explore the life of a middle-aged domestic servant in Singapore who entrusts her destiny to gambling.

Through the narrative art, the two literary works depict the feeling of alienation in the game of chance under capitalism as opposed to any optimistic view of the workings of capitalism. Using irony, the writers of the respective

stories portray the protagonists' expectations from gambling, their attempts to win lotteries, and situations contradicting their expectations. Through their respective storylines, the two writers reveal that the game of chance, instead of paving the way for the carefree life the characters desire, inflicts a sense of alienation on them regardless of what roles they play under capitalism. In this respect, these two stories can be read as a reversion to the concept of the invisible-hand metaphor which was introduced by Adam Smith (1723–1790), the author of *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations* (1998). Blaug (2008, 265) concludes that this metaphor embraces three interconnected ideas: one is that the private actions of individuals can have unforeseen and unintended social consequences. Next, these private self-interested actions and the unintended social consequences may be harmonious in mutually promoting the interests of all members of society. Last, there is an order in these harmonious outcomes. A contrasting but related perspective is provided by Courtemanche (2011) who argues that there is no guarantee that the workings of the invisible hand will not create ironic consequences.

2 Objective and Scope

This study aims to discuss and analyze the theme of alienation as reflected in the depiction of protagonists in games of chance under capitalism, using techniques of textual analysis. These two literary texts are *The Lottery of Karma* by Chanthi Deuanesavanh (2001) and *Lottery* by Catherine Lim (1992). This paper argues that the two literary works reveal that the protagonists, who live in different countries and are characterized by differing socioeconomic circumstances, experience feelings of alienation in the game of chance under capitalism regardless of whether they play the role of laborers, capitalists, or consumers.

3 Theoretical Frameworks

To support its argument, the paper applies Marx's and Jaeggi's accounts of alienation as theoretical frameworks to examine the literary elements of *The Lottery of Karma* by Chanthi Deuanesavanh (2001) and *Lottery* by Catherine Lim (1992). The analysis of the protagonists of these two stories reveals that they experience various forms of alienation while performing three different roles in the game of chance under capitalism. Their alienation as laborers in capitalist societies can be discussed according to the Marxist concept, which

emphasizes the social structures of alienation. Meanwhile, the alienation they experience as capitalists and consumers can be discussed according to Jaeggi's (2014) concept of alienation, which emphasizes human relations to oneself, their own actions, things, other human beings, social institutions, and their worlds. This paper is structured as follows: initially, the social settings as the outcomes of supervision of the nation-states are presented. Then, it discusses the alienation of the protagonists in the roles of laborers, capitalists, and consumers, before the concluding section.

4 Alienation in the Game of Chance Under Capitalism

4.1 *Social Settings as the Outcomes of Supervision of the Nation-States*

Social setting allows readers to see the outcomes of the nation-states. A close reading can lead to an understanding of its influence on the characters. Marx and Engels (1999) write, "It is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but their social existence that determines their consciousness." Marxist theory suggests that social or economic structures can affect individuals to the extent that individuals fail to develop their full powers to lead lives of their own, to find meaning in their lives, and to make their lives worthwhile (Schmitt 2018, 32). By the same token, a social setting in a literary work is significant, for the makeup and behavior of fictional characters often depend on their environment as much as their personal characteristics and in some cases the entire action of fictional characters is determined by the locale in which the work is set (Encyclopaedia Britannica 2016). In this respect, an exploration of social setting helps shed light on its influence over characters' inner lives. The social settings in the respective stories reflect outcomes of the gambling policies implemented by the nation-states.

Employing the omniscient point-of-view in the exposition, the authors reveal the social settings to which the protagonists are exposed. Through this choice of point-of-view, the narrator in each story embeds a lexicon relating to gambling. Deuanesavanh's *The Lottery of Karma* (2001) reveals that the protagonist's motivation to gamble comes from the materialistic ideas prevailing in his neighborhood. Specifically, the protagonist lives in poverty whilst the lottery winners in his community can afford a 'two-storey house,' 'color TV sets,' 'refrigerators,' 'air-conditioners,' 'cars,' 'pickups,' and 'tuk-tuk' (auto rickshaws). This lexicon can transcend the protagonist's idea of association between material possessions and happiness. Meanwhile, the author of *Lottery* uses a lexicon relating to gambling activities, such as 'gambling tables,' 'race horses,' 'race' and 'draws' to suggest their wide availability in the protagonist's neighborhood.

Apart from the lexicon integrated into the omniscient point-of-view, the use of an ironic tone conveys the impact of the gambling policies on people's behaviors. In their attempts to find winning numbers, people become so irrational that they fail to perceive things as they actually are. Deuanesavanh, the author of *The Lottery of Karma*, writes "hearing the sounds of wood mites biting through wood or baying dogs, they would interpret them into numbers. Even the sound of a husband's farting or a wife peeing would also be interpreted the same way" (Deuanesavanh 2001, 30–31). Lim in *Lottery* (1992, 28) writes, "the whispered consultations of fellow-gamblers who were not too selfish to share 'tips.'" That is to say, the people believe in the reality of a 'tip' or a secret about possible winning numbers and take it as a valuable personal object. This ironic tone suggests that people in these social settings cling so tightly to the faint hopes offered by gambling that they become irrational.

Also, the two authors present the negative effects of gambling in the respective social settings. Although gambling offers gamblers chances to become rich, not all gamblers benefit in the same way. Deuanesavanh writes, "some families were ruined because of their beliefs in dreams and omens" (2001, 29). Meanwhile, the narrator in *Lottery* describes a man who sells lottery tickets as "a fat, oily-faced man who grew yet fatter on the money of domestic servants" (Lim 1992, 28). This implies that those who become richer are the lottery vendors, not those who buy the tickets. This presentation, on the one hand, makes the literary works sound realistic and representational; on the other hand, it prepares the reader for events, presumably not good ones, that happen to the protagonists.

In brief, through the use of the omniscient point-of-view, the authors have given vivid depictions of social settings, or gambling environments in particular, which are the outcomes of the supervision of the nation-states. In these environments, the protagonists are urged to play the lottery. It will be seen that the protagonists in both stories, as members of these capitalistic societies, fall prey to alienation by accumulating wages, dealing with risks and hoping for a positive return from their investment, and consuming under conditions of economic necessity or affluence, in their roles of laborers, capitalists, and consumers respectively. Rather than permitting individuals freedom, these roles enforce various types of alienation.

4.2 *Alienation of the Protagonists in the Game of Chance under Capitalism*

4.2.1 Playing the Role of Laborers

The authors of both stories place their protagonists squarely within the service or working class. And in so doing, their socio-economic status reflects the basis

of alienated labor as described by Marx. Although we do not see or hear the protagonists themselves revealing their feelings, their inner lives are portrayed to us through their speech, actions, thoughts, and the narrators' commentary.

Playing the role of laborer, Xiang Khane – the protagonist of *The Lottery of Karma* – experiences alienation. Through examining the imagery concerning Xiang Khane's work, we can see clearly that his job, which is repairing motorcycles in front of his house, does not allow him to establish a relation to the product of his labor, and also disturbs his relations to himself, other people, and the world he lives in. Deuanesavanh (2001, 29) writes, "he earned his living through his own sweat and labor." The words 'sweat' and 'labor' call our attention to not only the protagonist's physical toil but also the drudgery in his life. Moreover, the protagonist is described as a man who would "bury himself in his motorcycle repair shop" (Deuanesavanh 2001, 34). This connotes working in solitude and dealing with objects. It is clear that as soon as his customers pay for his services and get their motorcycles back, he has no say in his labor. It should be noted that Xiang Khane fancies owning a taxi or *tuk-tuk* which he could use to earn money and connect himself to a wider world. In other words, the irony is that the service of his labor yields a means of transportation for people whereas his work gives him no freedom to expose himself to the world.

In the same way, Ah Boh – the protagonist of *Lottery* – is an alienated worker. An analysis of the characterization of Ah Boh shows that because she is a domestic worker, her life depends on external forces. This is reflected in the manner in which the narrator – her boss – talks about her. The narrator clearly describes Ah Boh as "naïve and foolish as a child, shedding tears easily in her anxieties, [...]". She now wept noisily, begging my pardon and calling shrilly upon Thunder to strike her dead if she has done anything wrong to me" (Lim 1992, 27). The description of Ah Boh's speech and actions in which Ah Boh exaggerates the importance of obedience to her boss provides a hint to the reader of her feelings of alienation. Needless to say, Ah Boh, as domestic help, is subject to her boss's control and discretion instead of her own. Moreover, Ah Boh's weeping at the realization of her approaching retirement, when she will not be able to earn money, reveals the insecurity and anxiety she feels when faced with her future. In addition, her daily routine of running over in the evening after dinner to buy lottery tickets in the neighborhood hints at her need for a haven from her place of employment and a place that provides her with a chance for personal fulfilment or a space that gives her a sense of freedom. The vivid description of Ah Boh's actions can be interpreted as a reflection of her feeling of alienation and lack of control over her life, resulting from her role as a laborer who fails to establish relations to her job, herself, and the world.

In sum, the writers of these two stories employ narrative strategies to reveal the feelings of Xiang Khane and Ah Boh that are associated with their jobs. Performing services to earn wages, both characters lack freedom, for they are not the masters of their own actions and lose relations to themselves and the world. In this social structure, they are alienated laborers as described by Marx in his account of alienation. Also, as the stories progress, the authors of these stories reveal that this condition rouses the urge to break free from the limitations of the working class not only to accumulate additional wealth, but also to achieve a more autonomous means of accumulating capital. In doing so, the protagonists invest money in the game of chance as capitalists.

4.2.2 Playing the Role of Capitalists

The word ‘capitalist’ has several definitions. Taken broadly, the very term used in this paper means “a person who uses their wealth to invest in trade and industry for profit in accordance with the principles of capitalism” (Lexico n.d.). In this study, the two protagonists are defined in this sense. They spend hefty sums of money on lottery tickets – part of the gambling industry – hoping for prizes or financial gain. Obviously, there is risk of loss in the game of chance.

To reveal the inner lives of the protagonists, the two authors subtly shift to the limited omniscient point of view, describing the protagonists’ actions, speech, and especially thoughts in their attempts to maximize their chances of financial profit. This method is significant, for it suggests the inadequacy of speech of the protagonists as conveyors of emotions. Roberts (1992, 90) points out that in this form of narrative, the author confines or limits attention to describe the inner workings of major characters. In the same respect, Bergman and Epstein (1987) note that this choice of narrative allows the reader to see the scene as though the reader is participating in it, whilst at the same time the reader can step back and evaluate the major characters more objectively. Told using limited omniscient point of view, these two stories reveal the effects of the game of chance that serves as a cause of the protagonists’ feelings of alienation. Employing this mode of narrative, the authors reveal that the protagonists apply two approaches in their attempts to find winning numbers, i.e., developing superstitious beliefs and praying to supernatural beings. However, both approaches aggravate their alienation.

As for the first approach, they develop superstitious beliefs. It is worth mentioning that the term ‘superstition’ means “a belief or practice resulting from ignorance, fear of the unknown, trust in magic or chance, or a false conception of causation” (Merriam-Webster n.d.). In this study, the protagonists consider some events, dreams, or objects as harbingers of winning numbers. Narrating

from limited omniscient third-person point of view, the authors of the two stories use connotative words to indicate the protagonists' attitude toward the materials. They use a humorous tone to refer to the objects with which the protagonists are obsessed and a serious tone to describe their responses, assuming that readers will understand the protagonists' feelings of alienation. This writing strategy lends some insight to the effects of superstitious beliefs on each protagonist's inner life.

Xiang Khane dreamt of a very big eagle swooping down to catch a turtle and soaring up to the sky with the animal in its beaks. When he woke up in the morning, he went to the elders to ask them to interpret his dream.

DEUANESAVANH 2001, 31

Ah Boh knew by heart that a spider was Number 3, and the act of defecation Number 10.

LIM 1992, 28

The words describing their dreams or thoughts such as 'an eagle,' 'a turtle,' 'a spider,' and 'the act of defecation' indicate the authors' attitudes towards the protagonists' superstitious beliefs and reveal the absurdity of the images in the protagonists' minds. This gives readers insight that such a distortion of the protagonists' worldviews results in their failure to appropriate themselves or their worlds, to make the worlds their own. This phenomenon is in harmony with the concept of alienation as explained by Jaeggi (2014).

In the second approach, the two protagonists pray to supernatural beings. The authors of the respective stories incorporate 'apostrophe' in the limited omniscient narrative voice to divulge the characters' inner lives. It is worth mentioning that 'apostrophe' is a rhetorical figure in which the speaker addresses a dead or absent person, or an abstraction (Baldick 2004, 17). In the selected stories, the protagonists address respected beings who are invisible in this earthly world, believing that these beings have supernatural powers to bring them luck. Xiang Khane addresses a supernatural being, praying "*Sadhu* (I am begging the sacred being), [...] at least let me win a second or third prize" (Deuanesavanh 2001, 32). Meanwhile, Ah Boh fervently prays to the household gods "that the day (of winning lotteries) would come soon" (Lim 1992, 29). Then, she prays to her dead husband for the same thing. Both protagonists' prayers reveal their failure to realize their own human potential which would enable them to lead fulfilled lives.

Reflecting their capitalistic ideas, the protagonists' prayers can be interpreted as an absence of relations to things. In capitalist society, things which

have no monetary worth are converted into goods, which can be exchanged for a positive return, and capitalists are encouraged to seek profit (Robbins 2005). In this study, the use of apostrophe reveals that the protagonists offer things in exchange for winnings in the same way as capitalists offer 'goods' in exchange for profit. Xiang Khane offers flowers and popped rice. Meanwhile, Ah Boh lights a joss-stick every morning and offers scented flower petals to the household gods. In fact, the objects as such should be taken as tokens of their sincere respect for the virtues of these supernatural beings, rather than as objects for exchange. This suggests the protagonists' absence of relations to both things and the respected beings addressed.

In addition, their prayers indicate deficient relations to their actions and other beings. Xiang Khane trades his goodness for winning the lottery, praying, "*Sadhu, sadhu*, I am an honest man who has never seen thousands or millions in my entire life. May all the sacred deities take pity on me and help me to get rich like others" (Deuanesavanh 2001, 31). As a capitalist, he exchanges a moral characteristic for financial gain. This implies that his honesty is not his own choice, but rather is merely a means to an end. In other words, he does not have a close relationship to his integrity. Thus, this portrays a lack of the sense of living his own life. Needless to say, a person who is free from alienation is the master of his own life, rather than the object of the course it has taken. Meanwhile, Ah Boh uses her relationships with her dead husband, and her old mother for her personal gain. In particular, she exchanges the goodness of her mother, begging her deceased husband to help her by convincing him that she deserves to win the lottery. She reminds her dead husband's spirit that he is still indebted to her old mother, who was good to him when he was alive, using language laden with negotiation, "Let me win a lot of money. I am not thinking so much of myself as of *my old mother, your mother-in-law*" [emphasis mine] (Lim 1992, 29). The use of two different phrases within close proximity – 'my old mother' and 'your mother-in-law' – for one referent hints at the significance when the speaker's implication is taken into account. That is, she calls for mutual benefits for all the involved parties. Thus, Ah Boh's capitalist idea can lead to a disturbance of the relations between Ah Boh herself and other beings. It is clear that good relationships should be ends in themselves rather than treated as means to ends of personal benefits.

In short, the authors of these two respective stories, by employing the limited omniscient third person point of view, give the reader insights into the minds of the protagonists. We find that when they play the role of capitalists, they cherish superstitious beliefs and pray to supernatural beings. These practices serve as causes for alienation. Although their capitalistic ideas to get a positive return from the game of chance are not the center of alienation, it is

their effects that reduce the protagonists' ability to live their own lives and to establish relations to things, actions, other beings, and the world, as described by Jaeggi (2014). Under capitalism, the ultimate purpose of the protagonists' pursuit of money by accumulating wages as laborers and investing and hoping for profit as capitalists is to spend it on consumption as consumers.

4.2.3 Playing the Role of Consumers

Consumption is part of the operation of capitalism. With enough money, individuals can buy anything for sale in the market. Nevertheless, there are differences in their ability to access goods and services. Bauman (1987) points out that it is possible to identify two broad social groups within consumer culture: the seduced and the repressed. The seduced are incorporated into consumer culture; they devote themselves to the acquisition and display of commodities. In contrast, the repressed are described as the poor or those who lack economic and cultural resources. As a result, they are excluded from the market and the club of consumers (Bauman 1987).

Consumer culture allows individuals who possess economic resources to enter the club of consumers. However, they can subsequently become the seduced in Bauman's (1987) terms, who consume for the sake of social significance. Influenced by Marxism, Baudrillard (1996) argues that the system of production under capitalism creates human needs, including the need for pleasure, and that material goods convey meanings in modern societies. Consumption of these goods is a systematic act of the manipulation of signs, not merely the passive receipt of production through the satiation of needs. Rather it is an inactive endeavor in the manipulation of signs where the social logic of signification is of primary importance. According to Baudrillard (2017), needs in consumer culture are directed not so much toward objects, as toward values; and an individual's satisfaction initially relies on their sense of signing up for those values. The fundamental, unconscious, automatic choice of the consumer is in harmony with the style of life of a particular society and usually a group of higher status. Hence, the consumer actually has no choice, freedom, or autonomy.

In this study, the writers of both stories use structural irony to elucidate the protagonists as alienated persons under this social scheme. Structural irony in literature involves the use of a naïve or deluded hero whose view of the world differs widely from the true circumstances, recognized by the author or readers; it thus compliments the reader's intelligence at the expense of a character (Baldick 2004, 130). In this study, the structural irony lies in the fact that the protagonists seem not to know how to live their own life as they please. Specifically speaking, the two protagonists become 'the seduced' and change

their patterns of consumption once they acknowledge that they have won or have a strong feeling about approaching luck. The price of commodities is no longer an important consideration at this point, for these two characters seek to spend their winnings on the sign values of products and consume excessively to affect the stereotypical images that they want to present. Therefore, the seduction of consumer culture reestablishes alienation.

The author of *The Lottery of Karma* uses a lexicon connoting a pragmatic and security-seeking orientation to imply the protagonist's lifestyle choice and repressed desires. Before learning that he has won the second prize, Xiang Khane promised the supernatural being in his prayers that he would sell the pickup on the spot and spend the money on what he actually wants. The author describes the protagonist's prayer for material possessions, using a lexicon consisting of the following: 'house,' 'land,' 'car,' 'color tv,' 'refrigerator,' 'porch,' 'sofa,' and 'a full set of furniture.' In addition, the author writes the purposes of some items, for example "dig a fish pond and buy a taxi or a *tuk-tuk* to earn money" and "other things to entertain guests in my house" (Deuanesavanh 2001, 32). The use of this lexicon reflects the suppressed desires of Xiang Khane whose lack of financial resources prevents him from making his life his own.

The analysis of the author's use of different vocabulary in *The Lottery of Karma* brings to light the consumer culture of this social structure that exacerbates the protagonist's alienation. The author's use of connotative words suggests that Xiang Khane's consumption conforms with the signification of his masculinity and sociability. Describing how Xiang Khane simply falls into the trap of consumer culture upon winning the second prize, the author uses a lexicon which reveals that his consumption is associated with the image of a sociable, generous man. A lexicon describing the protagonist's alcohol consumption in a restaurant includes 'whisky,' 'soda,' 'liquor,' 'beer,' 'Johnny (sic) Walker.' Conveying cultural meaning, these products are a sign indicating his attributes of masculinity and sociability. In the cultural context of the Lao PDR, alcohol consumption is considered to be an attribute of masculinity and male drinking is identified with being hard and tough (Lee, Battle, Antin, and Lipton 2008). In addition, the name of the alcohol he consumes conveys an attribute of sociability. The advertising campaign for Johnnie Walker whisky says: "an impressive whisky to share on any occasion, whether you're entertaining at home with friends or on a memorable night out" (Johnnie Walker: n.d.). According to Lury (2011, 58), the meaning of goods is added to through the process of advertisement and promotion. Also, Deuanesavanh describes girls in the restaurant sitting in Xiang Khane's group, using a lexicon to provoke the idea of men's sensual pleasure, for example 'dance floor,' 'red-cheeked,' 'young looking girls,' 'tight-fitting dresses,' 'snuggled close,' 'smiling and making eyes'

and 'fondle,' etc. In other words, by means of this vocabulary, the author is able to describe the protagonist's application of social logic of signification under this social condition. This leads to the interpretation that the protagonist is a seduced individual who fails to make sense of his own life or be his own person.

In a similar way, Lim's *Lottery* incorporates structural irony. This device accompanies the characterization of the protagonist in her role of consumer who becomes alienated by consumer culture, for her poverty and addiction to gambling place severe limits on her ability to fulfil her personal desires and to support her mother. An examination of the characterization reveals the protagonist's feeling of alienation. Using authorial voice to describe the things that Ah Boh consumes, the author writes, "Ah Boh went about in clothes and slippers *worn thin* and satisfied her desire for cigarettes by making her own, rolling the tobacco salvaged from *thrown-away* cigarette butts in little square pieces of paper" [emphasis mine] (Lim 1992, 28). The modifiers 'worn thin' and 'thrown-away' suggest a repression of her desires for leisure under the condition of necessity. The author also uses speech of other characters to give the readers a full portrait of Ah Boh who loses most of her money on gambling. In particular, Ah Boh's mother says to her, "How much money can you spare to support your old mother this month? But don't worry I can take care of myself now. Take back your money and go and gamble with it" (Lim 1992, 30). That is to say, this protagonist fails to make herself and the world her own and loses the relation to others according to Jaeggi's (2014) account of alienation.

Furthermore, the characterization of Ah Boh tells the readers about Ah Boh's alienation even under the condition of affluence. The author describes that Ah Boh rushes to an accident scene, hoping to see the numbers on the plate of the damaged vehicle, so that she would know what number to play in the next lottery drawing. When she learns that her mother has died in the car accident, the author writes, "I (Ah Boh) will buy *the most expensive coffin* with the prize money and burn *a hundred joss-sticks* for you every day" [emphasis mine] (Lim 1992, 30). We may interpret this as Ah Boh's employment of the social logic of signification to convey that she is a filial daughter. The words 'coffin' and 'joss-sticks' carry culturally symbolic meaning. Traditionally, these things are part of a funeral. What is significant is the use of a modifier 'the most expensive' and a quantifier 'a hundred,' in Ah Boh's speech, for they depict Ah Boh's excessive consumption as well as her view of the price and quantity of products as an indication of her degree of gratitude toward her mother. In this way, she is a seduced individual. It is clear that these goods merely represent signs of gratitude in mourning and the quality of 'gratefulness' is not one we can quantify. That is to say, the word choice in association with the modifier and

quantifier in Ah Boh's speech suggests that she has fallen under the logic of signification of 'goods.' Douglas and Isherwood (1979, 66) explain that rituals give shape and substance to social relations; they fix or anchor social relationships, making sense of the flux of events and constraining the drift of meaning. The ritual is compared to ballast in the sense that it prevents cultural drift. In this story, the structural irony lies in the fact that the purchase of the most expensive coffin for a dead mother to lie in and burning a hundred joss-sticks every day cannot compensate for Ah Boh's failure to support her old mother when she was living. In other words, in this social setting, the protagonist is preoccupied with acquiring goods to the extent that she does not attend enough to the relationship with others.

To sum up, the authors of these two short stories use structural irony to illustrate that the force of social structures proves stronger than the intentions of the protagonists when the protagonists perform their role of consumers. In addition, it finds that the two protagonists follow the same patterns of consumption. As repressed consumers with limited means, both Xiang Khane and Ah Boh cannot buy commodities on impulse. As the seduced, they are not free because they are dominated by the logic of signification. This consumer culture makes them lose their relations to themselves, others, and products of consumption. In other words, these patterns of consumption give the protagonists a feeling of alienation in the sense described by Jaeggi (2014).

5 Conclusion

This paper analyzes the theme of alienation in two short stories by two S.E.A. Write awardees: *The Lottery of Karma* by Chanthi Deuanesavanh and *Lottery* by Catherine Lim, through the lens of literary devices. The social settings are two Southeast Asian countries, the Lao PDR and Singapore respectively. Supported by evidence from literary analysis, the finding is that these two authors employ literary art to present a complex reality of the game of chance under capitalism in two countries with considerably different socioeconomic conditions. However, the protagonists of the respective stories face the exact same oppression. In these circumstances, the protagonists are subject to alienation, regardless of whether they perform as laborers, capitalists, or consumers. As laborers, they work for the sake of money. As capitalists, they invest money in the game of chance, hoping for a positive return. To find winning numbers, they employ two strategies, holding superstition beliefs and praying to supernatural beings. As consumers, these two protagonists are the repressed and the seduced, but not simultaneously. Under these dominant social schemes, the protagonists

are not the masters of their own actions, but are separated from themselves, the products of their labor, the products of their consumption, other beings, and the worlds in which they live. In sum, this condition is a difficult predicament for the two protagonists.

Although the ‘invisible-hand’ mechanism of capitalism is said to turn advantage to the best interests of all members of society, those who are exposed to gambling in a capitalist society do not always enjoy such benefits. Rather, this social scheme can produce undesirable and unexpected outcomes. This truth contradicts the idea of the invisible-hand metaphor. Ultimately, the realities presented in the two stories are considered microcosms of real-world situations. Thus, they provide insight into the current dehumanizing of society while at the same time suggesting that to rid ourselves of this social ill, we should recognize the phenomenon of alienation and learn to make sense of our own lives.

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