

# Unveiling social realities: A Marxist analysis of Rene Eune Ponte's balak

<sup>1</sup>Mary Grace Restaura, <sup>1</sup>Judelyn Cahucom, <sup>1</sup>Sheilamae Gallo,  
<sup>1</sup>Deije Acero & <sup>2</sup>Arlene Loquias

## Abstract

The research employs the Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) framework within the Marxist literary approach to examine selected balak (poetry) from Rene Eune Pueblos Ponte's collection Hagawhaw sa Salibagjaw. Ponte, a prominent cultural figure in the Bohol School of Living Traditions, Bohol, Philippines captures the socio-political realities of his community through poetry. The study focuses on five balak selected based on Marxist criteria, emphasizing their reflection on class struggle, ideology, and socio-economic disparities. Using CDA, the research dissects the linguistic and thematic elements of the balak, revealing how language conveys power dynamics and class ideologies. The analysis identifies recurring Marxist themes: alienation, corruption, poverty, inequality, and social injustice. These themes illustrate Ponte's critique of systemic oppression while resonating with broader socio-political conditions in the Philippines. Findings demonstrate that Ponte's balak are cultural artifacts encapsulating collective struggles and aspirations. His poetic imagery and stylistic devices articulate the lived experiences of marginalized communities, fostering critical consciousness among readers. The study bridges literary analysis with societal critique, emphasizing the relevance of Marxist literary criticism in understanding regional literature. Ponte's verses become a vehicle for collective introspection, offering insights into the poet's and his community's societal challenges. This research contributes to appreciating Boholano literature by providing insights into societal issues embedded in local poetic traditions. It advocates for including regional literary works in the curriculum, enriching cultural understanding and critical thinking while shedding light on enduring societal issues in the Philippines that resonate with the Marxist themes found in Ponte's poetry.

**Keywords:** *Marxist literary approach, critical discourse analysis, balak, societal issues, Boholano literature*

## Article History:

*Received:* November 7, 2024

*Accepted:* January 7, 2025

*Revised:* January 4, 2025

*Published online:* January 19, 2025

## Suggested Citation:

Restaura, M.G., Cahucom, J., Gallo, S., Acero, D. & Loquias, A. (2025). Unveiling social realities: A Marxist analysis of Rene Eune Ponte's balak. *International Review of Social Sciences Research*, 5(1), 49-72. <https://doi.org/10.53378/irssr.353144>

## About the authors:

<sup>1</sup>Student, Bachelor of Secondary Education major in English, Holy Name University, Tagbilaran City, Philippines.

<sup>2</sup>Corresponding author. Master of Arts in Education, Assistant Professor 4, Holy Name University, Tagbilaran City, Philippines. Email: [aloquias@hnu.edu.ph](mailto:aloquias@hnu.edu.ph)



## 1. Introduction

Numerous Boholano writers have emerged in Boholano literature, giving rise to various literary groups such as the Society of Active Boholano Artists and Writers and Bahandi Writers in Loon, Bohol. Among these prolific writers is Rene Eune Pueblos Ponte, whose published balak (poetry) intricately captures contemporary social issues. This research endeavors to delve into the depths of Ponte's selected balak, namely: *Kujog*, *Mga Suwaki sa Kainggit*, *Mga Trabungko ug Bakunawa*, *Panahon sa mga Kwaknit*, and *Trabungko*, and to contextualize them within the framework of Marxist philosophy. The Marxist literary approach suggests that literature should be understood in relation to the social and economic realities of its time. It views the economy as the foundation of society, shaping ideologies, institutions, and practices, including literature. Marxist literary criticism looks at how literature reflects and influences class struggles (Ndi, 2020). The primary objectives guiding this study are twofold: 1) to dissect and discuss the Marxist themes perceptible in the chosen Balak of Rene Eune P. Ponte, and 2) to establish connections between these themes and the current sociopolitical landscape of the Philippines.

Literary analysis fundamentally fosters critical thinking, an essential skill that enables individuals, particularly students, to synthesize ideas, identify inconsistencies in reasoning, solve problems, and reflect on their beliefs. Recognizing this, this study emphasizes the significance of Rene Eune P. Ponte's works, written in the Cebuano-Binisaya language, as they deeply resonate with the Boholano people. Ponte's poetry serves as a powerful medium to engage readers, connecting them to societal realities and cultural heritage while inspiring awareness and reflection on the pressing issues within their community. Moreover, the study argues that local balak provides learners with a deeper understanding of their social environment while simultaneously fostering sociolinguistic awareness and enriching their language use. This research addresses a gap in existing studies by focusing on the integration of Marxist themes and Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to examine the intersections of class struggles, stylistic devices, and current Philippine realities depicted in local poetry. Unlike previous studies that primarily examined balak from aesthetic or linguistic perspectives, this study uniquely highlights its socio-political dimensions and pedagogical value, making it relevant not only to literature but also to understanding broader societal dynamics.

This study's findings can contribute significantly to the teaching of Philippine Literature, particularly in the Poetry section, where the competency focuses on understanding

literature to appreciate Philippine culture. By analyzing local literature that portrays class struggles, this research provides additional teaching materials that align with this objective, offering learners a nuanced understanding of Filipino experiences and cultural identity. The social relevance of this study extends beyond education. For society, it serves as a medium to reflect on and critique prevailing social injustices, particularly those rooted in systemic inequalities. For language and literature teaching, it equips educators with culturally relevant materials that deepen students' appreciation for local literature and its unique ability to capture the struggles and aspirations of marginalized communities. For Boholano culture, it underscores the importance of preserving and celebrating regional literary traditions, ensuring that these voices continue to resonate in contemporary discourse and inspire collective introspection. Thus, these considerations motivate the researchers to undertake a literary analysis of Rene Eune P. Ponte's selected balak, with the primary aim of addressing three key research objectives. First, it seeks to identify the Marxist themes present in Ponte's balak, shedding light on the socio-political issues woven into his poetry. Second, it examines the stylistic devices employed in each balak to understand how these literary techniques enhance the expression of the identified themes. Finally, it explores the depiction of current Philippine societal conditions in Ponte's balak, particularly in relation to the Marxist themes, to highlight the enduring relevance of his work in reflecting and critiquing social realities.

## **2. Theoretical Framework**

Marxism, developed by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels in the nineteenth century, is a realist framework for understanding society. It seeks to analyze the material world and societal structures based on tangible, observable realities rather than abstract, idealist concepts of an otherworldly influence on the material world. Marxist theory views texts as expressions of economic, sociological, and political dynamics, emphasizing their connection to the material conditions of their time. Prominent thinkers such as Karl Marx (1818–1883), literary theorist Georg Lukács (1885–1971), and Antonio Gramsci (1891–1937) have expanded the application of Marxist principles to literature. Marxism investigates how literature reflects and interacts with the socio-economic and political contexts of its production, highlighting the relationship between literary works and their historical and cultural moments. By examining the influence of specific literary periods and the socio-political forces that shaped them, Marxism provides critical insights into the creation, meaning, and interpretation of texts.

Marx theorized that class and its struggle were central to the evolution of history. He proposes that conflicts exist in society due to a dispute or antagonism between social classes, to the extent that each class attempts to reorganize it politically and economically in its favor. The political and social progress that constitutes history would be parted from this constant struggle inherent in all forms of human political organization. Marxism believes that literature represents class struggle recognized through the Marxist literary approach. It explores how literature interacts with other aspects of the superstructure, especially other ideological expressions. A Marxist interpretation of the text reads it as an expression of current class struggle in literary theory (Zhang & Foley, 2021).

In Marxist literary approach, literary works assimilate as a representation of the social structures from which they emerge, understand social reality connects from society's structures (Foley, 2019). In reality, the work regards as a social institution with a distinct ideological feature based on the writer's philosophy and context. This literary criticism aims to decide whether a literary work's social substance or literary forms are progressive and evaluate its political tendency. The society's class division, class struggle, injustice, and political history illustrate Marxist criticism (Rummel, 1977, as cited in Gatcho & Delorino, 2019). This critique is more concerned with a work's social and political aspects than its aesthetic (creative and graphic) quality.

In connection to the study, the Marxist literary approach best fits the study because a Marxist reading of the text sees it as an expression of contemporary class struggle. In Marxism, literature is more than just a means of expressing oneself or one's taste. It is related to the social and political conditions of the time somehow. This literary criticism aims to decide whether a literary work's social substance or literary forms are progressive and evaluate its political tendency. Thus, this critique is more concerned with a work's social and political aspects than its aesthetic (creative and graphic) quality.

Additionally, this study is also supported by the CHED Memorandum Order No. 74 Series of 2017, entitled the Policies, Standards, and Guidelines for Bachelor of Secondary Education (BSEd) with the relevant provisions of the "Higher Education Act of 1994" stated in Article IV Section 6 that all teacher education disciplines must adhere to philosophical, socio-cultural, historical, psychological, and political contexts. Moreover, Article IV Section 7 states that one performance indicator for a Bachelor of Secondary Education Major in English integrates language, literature, culture, and society in the teaching-learning process.

The aforementioned includes the critique of selected literary pieces using appropriate literary theories. Furthermore, Article V Section 9 of the CHED Memorandum Order No. 75 listed the subjects to be taken by students in sub-discipline and major. There belong the Creative Writing, Literary Criticism, and the Survey of Philippine Literature. The Creative writing subject allows students to practice writing in different writing styles, including choosing regional languages for their output. The Literary Criticism subject allows students to study the fundamental approaches to literary theory and criticism and their application to selected literary works. Students select regional works of literature to explicate and analyze poetry. Lastly, the Survey of Philippine Literature allows students to recognize and understand Philippine literature.

### **3. Methodology**

In employing the Marxist literary approach, the researchers analyze Rene Eune Pueblos Ponte's selected Balak found in his self-published collection, "Hagawhaw sa Saligbagjaw". This study employs CDA as the linguistic framework to complement the Marxist literary approach. CDA facilitates an examination of how language in Ponte's selected balak reflects and critiques societal power dynamics, ideologies, and inequalities. Through this framework, the study uncovers how Ponte's linguistic choices resonate with the collective struggles of his community, providing insights into the enduring societal issues in the Philippines. CDA provides a strong methodology for analyzing discursive reflections of social issues and identifying new sites of public discourse for systematic analysis (Nartey & Mwinlaaru, 2019). To ensure methodological rigor, specific criteria were established for the inclusion of poems in this analysis. The study selected five balak from Ponte's collection based on four criteria: contemporary publication to reflect current Philippine issues, prior recognition or publication for reliability, depiction of societal issues to align with Marxist analysis, and pedagogical value for use as learning materials. These criteria narrowed the selection to five poems out of fifty for analysis - "Kujog"; "Mga Suwaki sa Kainggit"; "Mga Trabungko ug Bakunawa"; "Panahon sa mga Kwaknit"; and "Trabungko." The primary objective is to discern a common theme, focusing on the social issues underpinning the selection.

Subsequently, the interpretative phase serves as a crucial foundation for the ensuing discussion, where the connection between Marxist themes and their manifestation in the individual and the contemporary Philippine societal context is explored. To ensure the credibility of the analysis, the study adhered to rigorous criteria in selecting and analyzing the

poems. Second, the analysis was anchored on established theoretical frameworks—Marxism and Critical Discourse Analysis—to provide a systematic and scholarly lens. Finally, the study applied consistent criteria to examine societal issues, ensuring that interpretations were grounded in textual evidence and aligned with the socio-cultural context of the Philippines. This scholarly inquiry aims to contribute to a nuanced understanding of the intersection between the Philippines' literary expression, Marxist ideology, and socio-political realities.

#### 4. Findings and Discussion

Marx theorized that class and its struggle were central to the evolution of history. He claims that the ruling class's desire to produce more goods, combined with the lower class's opposition, has driven the evolution of society (Heller & Feltribelli, 2018). To emphasize this, consider the following passage from the “Communist Manifesto” (Marx et al., 2002, p. 31): *“The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles. Freeman and slave, oppressor and oppressed, stood in constant opposition to one another, carried on an uninterrupted, now hidden, now open fight, a fight that each time ended, either in a revolutionary reconstitution of society at large or in the common ruin of the contending classes.”*

Class is defined as a vertical division into superior-inferior or superordinate-subordinate, which means a difference in class is a difference in wealth, power, or esteem. Access to land and property has long been associated with class character and politics in the Marxist tradition (Levien et al., 2018, as cited in Gatcho et al., 2019). This phenomenon associates ownership of material resources with a higher position in the class hierarchy, whereas a lack of such resources means subordination. Marxism divides people into two classes: the bourgeois, who control the capital and means of production, and the proletariat, who provide the labor. Karl Marx's preconception of social conflict was a class struggle between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie. Class struggle manifests throughout the balak studied, including alienation, corruption, poverty and economic inequality and social injustice.

**Theme 1: Alienation.** According to Marxist theory, alienation is a state of laborers in a capitalist economy caused by a lack of identification with the products of their labor and a sensation of being controlled or exploited. Marx claims that something alienates when what is (or should be) familiar and linked appears foreign or disconnected. One of the five balak

exemplifies this. “*Ang Mga Trabungko ug Bakunawa*” tackles alienation, which addresses how technological advancement has subjugated a new generation of young people. Ponte compares the local culture to that of the trabungko, which is highly valued by their forefathers, and the bakunawa, who introduce technology to the youth. Alienation can be seen in this second stanza of the balak:

*Apan ang kabatan-onan ning bag-ong milenya*

*Nagkaulipon na sa kauswagan sa teknolohiya (5-6)*

(But the youth of this new millennium / Are now enslaved by the march of technology)

Ponte employs contrastive language to juxtapose "youth of this new millennium" with "enslaved by the march of technology," highlighting a paradox where progress (technology) leads to subjugation (enslavement). The term "*nagkaulipon*" (enslaved) carries strong connotations of oppression and loss of autonomy, suggesting that technological advancements, often celebrated as a sign of progress, have become tools of alienation and exploitation. The use of "*kauswagan*" (progress) in juxtaposition with "*nagkaulipon*" (enslaved) exposes the irony of technological development that benefits the few at the cost of the many, reflecting Marxist critiques of modern capitalism and its alienating effects.

The poet critiques how youth, a vital social force for transformation, are ensnared in a cycle of dependency on technology. This criticism aligns with Marxist ideas about how capitalism commodifies every aspect of life, including the tools of communication and innovation. In the context of the Philippines, where technological development often mirrors global capitalist trends, the poet reflects the reality of increasing digital dependence. Many youths engage with technology as consumers rather than creators, reinforcing systemic inequalities where corporate elites control technology. The "*enslavement*" can also be read as a metaphor for the cultural alienation of the youth, as they are drawn away from traditional values, local practices, and collective consciousness towards a more individualistic, commodified digital culture.

Ponte remarked that today's youth are now interested in technology. Youth have lost interest in local products and no longer value the local culture. In the third stanza of “*Ang mga Trabungko ug Bakunawa*” Ponte emphasized the following lines:

*Pasagdan ta lang ba nga ang atong kapanulondan,*

*Signiton sa mga bakunawang dumuduong? (9-10)*

[Should we just allow our heritage to be devoured by the invading serpents?]

In these verses, Ponte provocatively questions whether people should allow technology to influence the cultural heritage slowly passed down from the ancestors. The term "*kapanulondan*" (heritage) conveys a sense of cultural and historical significance, reflecting collective identity and shared values. The metaphor "*bakunawang dumuduong*" (invading serpents) symbolizes external forces or oppressors, portraying them as predatory and destructive. Using "serpents" carries strong negative connotations, evoking betrayal, greed, and corruption. The rhetorical question "*Pasagdan ta lang ba*" (Should we allow) challenges the audience's passivity, urging them to take action against threats to their cultural legacy. The poet urges the youth to be proactive in preserving local culture, emphasizing the need for action to safeguard and uphold the rich traditions handed down through generations.

In the contemporary world, technology is intricately linked with capitalist endeavors, serving primarily for commercial purposes. The increasing reliance on technology is evident in various aspects of work, especially in the digital era, where its significance is heightened. The poem underscores the impact of technology on today's youth, highlighting a shift towards foreign cultures and products at the expense of local interests. This trend suggests a gradual transformation in society, raising concerns about the potential erosion of cultural heritage. The poem contemplates a future where machines might replace human roles, potentially reducing the need for human involvement. The lines highlight the tension between preserving local traditions and succumbing to external pressures that undermine cultural and social autonomy. In the last stanza of the balak "*Ang mga Trabungko ug Bakunawa*", Ponte wants to invite, inspire, and challenge the younger generation to bring back their concern and participation in the appreciation and preservation of the local culture as he says:

*"Karon, ako kamong awhagon...*

*Dasigon...labaw sa tanan,hagiton!*

*Talinsan ta ang mga pana sa pagpakabana,*

*Subhan ta pagbalik ang baraw sa paghanduraw,*

*Lig-onon ta ang mga taming sa pag-amping,*

*Ug ang kampana sa panginlabot, balikon ta sa pagbagting..." (16-21)*

[Now, I urge you... to be steadfast... above all, to be resilient!

Let us sharpen the arrows of vigilance,



let us return to the strength of reflection,  
let us reinforce the shields of protection, and  
let us ring the bell of involvement once more].

The author urged the youth to find a way to preserve the local culture. He emphasized that they must be proud of their culture and products since these are their pride and identity. He inspires and encourages today's youth to care about what is happening. Technology has positively impacted young people, particularly in recent years, but its usage must be prudently limited. They must consider what their forefathers did to maintain the culture that they now have. They must strengthen their protective barriers so foreign visitors retain what their forefathers valued.

Today's Filipino youth grapple with profound transformations brought about by technology, impacting various facets of their lives, from appearance and health to employment and education. The proliferation of cell phones and the Internet is transforming the Philippines' communication environment. Concurrently, new technologies are reshaping social relationships in novel and unexpected ways. New media allows Filipinos to quickly contact family and friends abroad and expose vital aspects of their identity. Furthermore, new media are altering traditional communication channels, allowing them to reach and impact more elements of daily life. The latest communication channels offer emancipatory opportunities and create new divisions and injustices (Yujie et al., 2022).

Communication is emerging as one of the leading causes of inequality. Moreover, technology's influence extends to social interactions, production, and consumption, potentially exacerbating class struggle, inequality, and socio-cultural issues. The current trajectory raises concerns about increased tension, social estrangement, suicide, and environmental damage. Social media, however, also offers an opportunity to mitigate these challenges. As a powerful platform, it should be leveraged to educate youth on issues affecting their growth and development. Schools, in particular, should consider social media as an informal platform to promote a new model of social education (Ibardeloza et al., 2022). This shift can empower the younger generation to engage thoughtfully with technology rather than letting it overshadow the cultural richness cherished by older generations. Ponte emphasizes this point, underscoring the crucial role of the youth in preserving Filipino culture and values in the digital age, even as the onus remains on parents to guide children away from the perils of digital addiction.

**Theme 2: Corruption.** Corruption is an inherent outcome of capitalism, where the pursuit of wealth is prioritized over human needs, and profit-driven motives justify unethical actions (Freedom Socialist Party, 2020). In addition, Transparency International (2021) states that corruption unjustly uses entrusted power for personal gain. It erodes trust, undermines democracy, stifles economic development, and worsens inequality, poverty, social division, and the environmental crisis. It is a significant obstacle to good governance in the Philippines. A recent literature review suggests that all levels of corruption, from petty bribery to grand corruption, patronage, and State capture, exist in the Philippines at a considerable scale and scope.

In “*Trabungko*” Ponte critiques systemic corruption, particularly within leadership, using powerful imagery and culturally embedded symbolism. The CDA lens reveals how language constructs a narrative of exploitation, deceit, and moral decay, aligning with broader critiques of governance and societal inequalities.

*“Diha sa tagolilong nga galamhan  
Ning malinglahon nga punoan;  
Nanggibugno ang mga kawkawan  
Paglungkab sa bulawang kaban---“ (5-8)  
[“In the hidden depths of cunning minds, /  
Of deceitful rulers intertwined; /  
Thieves clash in their desperate quest, /  
To pry open the golden chest”]*

The text employs words like “*tagolilong*” (hidden depths), “*malinglahon*” (deceitful), and “*kawkawan*” (thieves) to convey themes of secrecy, deception, and corruption. The “*bulawang kaban*” (golden chest) symbolizes communal wealth—public funds or natural resources—portrayed as objects of greed and exploitation. The phrase “hidden depths of cunning minds” suggests conspiratorial operations, emphasizing the covert nature of corruption, while the “thieves clashing” reflects internal conflicts among the corrupt elite driven by selfish motives.

Drawing from familiar narratives of systemic greed, the text resonates with audiences aware of governance failures. The poetic medium, rooted in Cebuano literary traditions, enhances its cultural relevance and accessibility, connecting the critique to local contexts. It

reveals the exploitation of power for personal gain, perpetuating inequality where the elite prospers at the expense of the marginalized.

The "*golden chest*" as a metaphor for communal resources highlights the societal harm caused by corruption, framing it as a theft from the collective. The chaotic "clash" among thieves underscores the destructive consequences of greed-driven systems, critiquing capitalist or feudal structures that normalize wealth accumulation and exploitation. By reflecting on the socio-political context, the text provokes critical awareness and resistance among readers disillusioned by systemic failures, urging collective action against inequities.

Ponte in these lines in the third stanza, discusses that corruption causes turmoil in the different societal sectors, including the church (*balay sa kabalaan*) and the different branches of the government – the executive (*kinapungkayan sa kagamhanan*), the legislative (*balay-balaoranan*), and the judiciary (*labawng hukmanan*):

*“Balay-balaoranan, balay sa kabalaan,  
Sa kinapungkayan sa kagamhanan,  
Bisan gani sa labawng hukmanan,  
Ang pinaakan sa tang-an nga bitin  
Sa pamentaha ug kagubot nanghaling:  
Ang trabungko dugokan sa limbong,  
Sa pekeng garbo, kahakog ug kaluho!” (10-16)*

[“House of laws, house of the divine, /  
In the highest seat of power confined; /  
Even in the halls of the supreme court's might, /  
The serpent's fanged bite ignites /  
Injustice and chaos, a spreading blight. /  
The coveted treasure breeds deceit/  
Cloaked in false power, greed, and luxury!"]

The last line depicts that corruption exists because of pride, greed, and luxury aside from the love of money. These lines criticize the State of governance or authority, highlighting the potential misuse of power, corruption, and moral shortcomings within the structures that uphold justice and order.

Furthermore, in "*Panahon sa mga Kwaknit*," Ponte candidly highlights the pervasive issue of politicians, whom he labels as "*wakwak*," participating in elections under the guise of

sincerity and honesty, only to exploit the public by embezzling funds. This discerning commentary becomes particularly evident in the conclusive lines of the third stanza:

*“Apan kadaghan bang wakkaw nga nagtakoban,  
Makawkaw lamang ang bulawan sa kaban.” (17 – 18)*  
[“But countless ghouls, in disguise masked,  
Await to steal the gold that lies inside the box”]

The conclusive lines reveal the crux of Ponte's discerning commentary. The phrase "*Makawkaw lamang ang bulawan sa kaban*" suggests that the multitude of deceptive politicians benefit by plundering the metaphorical treasury ("*bulawan sa kaban*"). These lines underscore the prevalence of corruption and embezzlement within the political landscape.

Corruption fuels class struggle and hinders national development, as vividly depicted in poems like "*Trabungko*" and "*Panahon sa Kwaknit*." In the Philippines, oligarch-and-clan corruption is a pervasive issue where oligarchs and powerful families manipulate the political system for personal or familial gain (Abrea, 2023). This systemic problem is reflected in global corruption metrics; for instance, the Corruption Perception Index ranked the Philippines 115th out of 180 nations in 2023, indicating a worsening situation (Trading Economics, 2023). Transparency International (2019) further reported a decline in political integrity, with the country dropping 14 scores from its 2018 ranking of 99th. High-profile scandals, such as the Bataan Nuclear Power Plant and NBN–ZTE deals, exemplify corruption's grip on government infrastructure projects (Batalla, 2020). These persistent failures to address corruption embolden high-ranking officials to exploit the government for personal gain, perpetuating systemic inequities and obstructing meaningful political reform.

**Theme 3: Vote Buying.** Vote buying is another form of political deception and corruption Ponte emphasized in his *Balak*. According to Canare et al. (2022), vote-buying has a propensity to affect impoverished individuals disproportionately. This prevalent practice in the Philippines involves an exchange, where voters may align with the politician offering the highest financial incentive. Despite the ethical concerns surrounding this phenomenon, individuals often succumb to the allure of accepting money from politicians, driven by pressing financial needs such as acquiring food and necessities. In "*Kujog*," Ponte conveys that people's

right to suffrage can easily be blinded by money. The following lines reflected the issue of vote-buying:

*“Ingun nga ang katungod sa pagpili  
Sayon ra gyud mabugtiag salapi” (7-8)*  
[Just as the right to vote,  
Can so easily be sold for gold]

The phrase *“ang katungod sa pagpili”* (the right to vote) employs a formal tone, emphasizing the inherent dignity and significance of suffrage. The word *“sayon”* (easily) juxtaposed with *“mabugtiag salapi”* (sold for gold) conveys a stark contrast between the sacredness of the right to vote and its reduction to a mere transaction. The text reflects a critique of systemic corruption, specifically vote buying, a persistent issue in Philippine elections. It encapsulates the tension between democratic ideals (voting as a right) and the materialistic reality (voting as a commodity). The cultural context of vote buying in the Philippines—where poverty often forces individuals to exchange their democratic rights for financial gain—is embedded in this discourse.

The first two lines of the balak imply how the bourgeoisie were able to exercise their power over the proletariat:

*“Ang pagpanahid ug tagumtagom gidili  
Apan unsa gani ang idili, ay pagkalami” (1-2)*  
[Catching *tagumtagom* fish in nets is forbidden,  
but what is forbidden, oh so satisfying]

The *tagumtagom*, a small fish, is metaphorically likened to the proletariat, representing the seemingly insignificant members of society. Conversely, fishing, known as *“ang pagpanahid,”* is carried out by those wielding greater societal power. Despite the prohibition against catching small fish, this practice persists, drawing a parallel to the illicit act of buying votes by politicians. While such actions are unlawful, pursuing political advantage encourages their continuation. In the balak, this transgression is labeled as *“pagkalami,”* signifying both a source of pleasure for the bourgeoisie and immediate gratification for the proletariat. The context of this discourse involves the social dynamics that surround corruption, specifically vote buying, which is a persistent issue in many political systems, including the Philippines.

The lines represent how the act of vote buying is forbidden by law (and moral codes), but the allure of material gain often makes it irresistible.

Moreover, in "*Panahon sa mga Kwaknit*", Ponte states that government officials, metaphorically compared to *kwaknit* are taking advantage of their power to manipulate the people, especially the poor, by luring them with money for their advantage and greed, sucking out the life of our society like bats sucking up blood. The first stanza states the government officials' manipulation:

*"Nasabwag na usab ang kaanghit sa mga kwaknit!  
Nangumbabit sa ngilit ning kampanaryo sa kapait,  
Hilom nilang laraw ang pagpatuyok sa panlantaw  
Aron ilang madumala, magawngan ang mga tawo" (1-4)*  
[The stench of the bats has spread once more!  
Clinging to the edges of the bell tower of sorrow,  
In silence, they scheme to twist perception's spin,  
So they may control and blind the hearts of men]

Here, the mention of "*kaanghit*" (foul odor) is metaphorically linked to bad political practices of politicians. The imagery of the foul odor spreading again among the "*kwaknit*" suggests the recurrence of unpleasant or corrupt political behavior. The term "*nangumbabit*," which means "clinging to," implies a connection to the negative attributes described earlier. "*Kampanaryo sa kapait*" can be interpreted as politicians who, figuratively, stand tall or prominent amidst the bitterness or hardships of society. This message could signify their visibility or influence despite unfavorable circumstances. The purpose behind their actions becomes clearer – "*aron ilang madumala*" (so they can manipulate), suggesting a deliberate effort to control or exploit. "*Magawngan ang mga tao*" implies the successful manipulation or persuasion of the people, potentially leading them astray.

In essence, these lines criticize the recurrence of corrupt political practices, highlighting how politicians, despite negative qualities, cling to prominence and manipulate public perception for their benefit. The metaphors evoke a sense of discontent with the prevailing political landscape and its impact on the ordinary people's perception. Additionally, in the fourth stanza, Ponte states that no matter how priests preach and warn the people about vote-buying, people still fall for it to fill the empty food table:

*“Mga pari nangiwali: sa salapi dili magpapilde  
 Apan ang tagingting sa sensilyo nagpangagni  
 Gisansan sa alimpatakan sa luthang sa kawad-on  
 Giduslitan diha sa talad nga haw-ang sa pagkaon” (17-20)*  
 [The priests preached: do not be defeated by money  
 But the jingling of coins beckoned  
 Pierced through the mind by the gun of poverty  
 Lit upon the empty table of food]

Many classifications of vote-buying also have different correlates, including some socio-economic factors, suggesting that it is a finely targeted activity. This only focuses on the premise that vote-buying is part of politicians' larger and deeper efforts to build clientele and patronage among constituencies. One tenet of Marxism is that economics determines all social actions and institutions. Hence, the normalization of vote-buying in the country can be attributed to economic challenges, compelling individuals to grasp the limited opportunity to receive money, regardless of the potential consequences. People's immediate concerns, especially those in lower-income brackets, revolve around survival, prioritizing current needs over future considerations. For many low-income families, the primary instinct is to address the pressing issue of daily sustenance, viewing the money received from politicians as essential assistance.

*“Kujog”* and *“Panahon sa Kwaknit”* depict the class struggle through poverty. In *“Kujog,”* citizens accept vote-buying due to poverty. At the same time, in *“Panahon sa Kwaknit,”* politicians manipulate low-income people to favor them through money or by giving goods, clothes, or material things. It implies that only the proletariat struggle to earn money, but the bourgeoisie uses their money to control society by luring low-income people. According to Canare et al. (2022), their data analysis after the 2016 elections showed that low-income families are the target of vote-buying. However, this varies depending on the classification of vote-buying. Giving goods or money is a step for politicians in building clientelism and patronage. During the automated elections in the Philippines, which started in 2010, political agents demonstrated that vote-buying is best when purchasers exploit the accepted practices. Certain electors have said that they have to reciprocate the cash given to them by the political candidates by deciding in favor of them.

The survey conducted by Canare et al. (2022) uncovered a few significant examples of vote purchasing, utilizing information on low-pay electors in Metro Manila after the 2016 national and local elections. All respondents reported that they got a vote-buying offer, and the occurrences of the diverse vote-buying types were generally circulated. The most widely recognized type of vote-buying was offering other material things, identified generally by respondents as shirts, umbrellas, mugs, and the like. The most prevalent type of vote purchasing was offering food, rice, or clothes. The sort of vote purchasing the vast majority relates to—offering cash in return for votes—was just the third most prevalent type.

**Theme 4: Poverty and Economic inequality.** Economic inequality is unequal income and job opportunities circulation among different societal groups. It is a concern in practically all states worldwide, and frequently, individuals are imprisoned in scarcity with little chance to rise the social hierarchy (Snider, 2019). Economic inequality is complex; high compositional inequality implies that the rich earn from capital and the poor from labor. When there's high compositional inequality, it usually leads to a bigger gap between the rich and the poor, resulting in high income inequality ((Ranaldi & Milanović, 2022).

According to All About Worldview (2021), Marxists believe that inequalities happen between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat, with economics as the foundation of the rest of society. It happens when political power is the organized power of one class (bourgeoisie) to oppress another (proletariat). It arises from the ruling class owning the means of production (factories) and exploiting their position when employing the working class. The ruling classes exploit the working classes by forcing them to work as hard as possible for the lowest wage (Jeong & Michael, 2008).

In the balak “Trabungko,” government officials are portrayed as belonging to the bourgeoisie, while ordinary citizens represent the proletariat. Economic inequality arises when these officials misuse their power, notably by embezzling funds intended to support low-income individuals. The lines "*Nanggibugno ang mga kawkawan / Paglungkab sa bulawang kaban*" (Thieves have conspired / To break into the golden treasury) depict those in political power as exploiting funds meant for financial aid to the impoverished and for initiatives aimed at improving the lives of the working class. The phrase "*bulawang kaban*" symbolizes the government treasury, filled by taxes meant to fund economic development projects.



Additionally, in lines 17-18 of the poem "*Trabungko*," Ponte states that for an ordinary citizen, money is earned in a complex way, unlike the government officials who undisputedly abuse their power. Moreover, those who are close to or have a connection with respective government officials can quickly get a job opportunity than those relying only on their skills:

*"Apan, sa yanong katawhan nga naningkamot,  
Ang trabungko ligdong nga pagpatulo sa singot." (17-18)*  
[But for the humble folk who strive,  
The true treasure is the honest shedding of sweat]

"*Trabungko*" illuminates class struggle and economic inequality, depicting government officials favoring unequal distribution of opportunities and wealth. This issue permeates various government sectors, aligning with Marxist perspectives on societal foundations rooted in economic disparities between the bourgeoisie and proletariat. The Philippines grapples with persistent social inequality, exemplified by 19.9 million people living below the poverty line (Mapa, 2022). Income inequality, the highest globally, necessitates urgent action. The ASEAN Trade Union Council reveals the Philippines as Southeast Asia's third-highest economic and social inequality. Beyond personal wealth, disparities impact land distribution, education, and welfare. Geographical disparities have also surfaced, with six Mindanao areas having high poverty rates. Indigenous peoples, comprising 1.7 million vulnerable individuals, face discrimination and neglect. Tuano and Cruz (2019) highlight the Philippines' economic growth but underscore the persistent challenges of income inequality and social exclusion. Oligarchical political dynamics, marked by political dynasties and conglomerates, impede developmental policies and democratization, aligning with Marxist views on the privileged enjoying life's amenities while the proletariat suffers.

The Marxist Theory keeps up with the issue of poverty, similar to wealth, which is an inevitable outcome of a capitalistic society. Also, the presence of joblessness and occupation frailty implies that there is consistently a 'reserve army of work.' Consequently, private enterprises and the bourgeoisie benefit from poverty (Wisman, 2024). It is not just that there are rich and poor. Instead, it is in the manner that some are rich since some are poor.

Class struggle, economic inequality, and exploitation can also be seen in the Balak "*Mga Suwaki sa Kainggit*." This poem shows a Marxist theme related to the struggles and challenges faced by society's marginalized and economically disadvantaged individuals.

Specifically, the verses highlight the dire circumstances of those in the streets, emphasizing their vulnerability and lack of care or attention. The reference to relying on cheap inhalants (rugby) as a form of solace underscores the desperation and the impact of economic deprivation, possibly resulting from a lack of parental support. This theme aligns with Marxist perspectives on how economic conditions can shape and determine the struggles and hardships experienced by different social classes. In the fourth stanza (lines 11-14), the poet metaphorically compares the youth to *Suwaki*.

*“Apan mas mabulokon ang mga suwaki sa kadalanan,  
Nagkagidlay, way nag-atiman: way kapaingnan!  
Puntil sa rugby ra ang gisaligan,  
Hulip sa kakulangan sa ginikanan.” (11-14)*

[But more colorful are the sea urchins on the street—  
Rugged and neglected, with nowhere to turn,  
Relying on scraps of rugby /  
To fill the gaps left by parents' shortcomings]

The term "*suwaki*," a type of sea shell, may metaphorically represent individuals from the lower socio-economic class. In these lines, the poet describes the condition of these individuals, indicating that they are in a state of hardship ("*nagkagidlay*") and lack care or attention from those in positions of power ("*way nag-atiman*"). The phrase "*way kapaingnan*" emphasizes their lack of comfort or relief. The mention of "*kakulangan sa ginikanan*" underscores the roots of their predicament, attributing their condition to the deficiencies in their family or parental support. In a Marxist interpretation, these lines highlight the exploitation and neglect experienced by the lower class, represented by the "*suwaki*." The lack of care, economic opportunities, and proper resources for coping contribute to their deteriorating condition, illustrating the broader theme of class struggle and economic inequality within society.

Poverty indeed plays a significant role in shaping the dynamics of parenting. In families grappling with poverty, the limitations in providing essential resources, such as quality education, hinder a child's opportunities for a better future. The financial constraints may lead to feelings of hopelessness and frustration among parents, potentially escalating the risk of adverse outcomes, including child abuse. Thus, the interplay between poverty and parenting

underscores the complex challenges families face in breaking the cycle of disadvantage and securing better prospects for their children.

Family members are significant influencers of a person's behavior, positively or negatively influencing an individual's decisions and lifestyle. Children wield enormous personal power. They can create whole, authentic, and healthy lives if they stay connected to this power and have that connection honored by the adults around them. At its fundamental level, creating a world in which children are empowered from birth begins a feeling of saving the generation that will change the world. In the same manner, Ponte states in his *Balak*:

*“Labi pang tam-is ang katagbaw mong matagamtam  
Kon mahabwa mo sila gikan sa kaalaotan  
Kay human mo mapukaw ang ilang kaamgohan,  
Bag-ong kaugmaon ang ilang ikagasa sa katilingban.” (17-20)*

[How much sweeter is the satisfaction you'll taste  
When you lift them from their misery;  
For once you awaken their potential,  
They will offer a new future to society]

**Theme 5: Social Injustice.** In the Philippines, an election is necessary to exercise democratic power. People accept civic obligation or ethical constraint to vote, that any earnest vote is ethically satisfactory, and that buying, selling, or exchanging votes is intrinsically wrong.

In "Kujog," Ponte deliberately stated the injustice brought by selling votes in the following lines. Moreover, Ponte said that vote-buying is against the law, violates moral justice, and disrespects beliefs of divine justice:

*“Supak man sa balaod ug tinuohan,  
Ang kangil-ad, itago ug iluom sa dughan-  
Ingon sa mga kujog, monunot sa kadaghanan  
Ug sa kaugmaon mamahala na lang” (9-12)*

[Though against law and faith it may be,  
Hide the filth deep within, let it be unseen.  
Like shadows that blend with the many,  
And leave the future to its uncertain destiny]

According to Gherghina et al. (2021), voters with limited knowledge and those dissatisfied with the functioning of democracy and its institutions are more inclined to accept transactional promises from politicians. These findings add to the existing body of research on electoral clientelism and political attitudes. Ponte echoes this concern, opposing the notion that voters only consider their gain without contemplating the consequences of their actions. The nation's future, Ponte emphasizes, lies in the hands of the people. However, voters need to be more efficient as citizens to elect an effective leader.

Despite these challenges, the poet injects hope in the third stanza (lines 13-16), suggesting that the future generation will be discerned to choose a visionary leader for the country.

*“Tagumtagum ug katawhan  
Pagliyok sa sahid sa kapalaran,  
Ang nahiuna way kabangkaagan;  
Ang ulahi, unta utokan, may kapilian” (13-16)*  
[A school of tiny fish, the crowd,  
Trapped in fate’s relentless shroud.  
The old, unwise, made choices grim;  
The young, hopefully wise, opt for the win.]

The metaphor of "*tagumtagum*" (a school of tiny fish) represents the vulnerable masses, trapped by systemic structures like corruption and exploitation, as highlighted by "*sahid sa kapalaran*" (trapped in fate’s shroud). The "*nahiuna*" (past generations) are critiqued for poor leadership choices, reflecting the long-term consequences of inequality and poor governance. In contrast, the "*ulahi*" (future generations) symbolize hope and the potential for change through education, awareness, and better options.

The use of local metaphors connects the critique to cultural and environmental contexts, portraying entrapment while urging liberation. The duality between "*nahiuna*" and "*ulahi*" underscores historical accountability and the need for proactive action. The poem critiques systemic failures but highlights the youth's role as agents of change, advocating for collective consciousness and reform. It effectively addresses social inequality, historical responsibility, and the potential for societal transformation.

## 5. Conclusion

Based on the analysis of the selected balak of Ponte, this study concludes that four prominent Marxist themes were found: 1) alienation, 2) corruption, 3) vote-buying and poverty 3) poverty and economic inequality, and 4) social injustice. Ponte's works prove that these are not simply poetry but an eye-opener of reality. The theme of alienation occurred in the balak, "*Mga Trabungko ug Bakunawa*," due to technological advancement that reflects the idea of recolonization. The *Balak*, "*Trabungko*," and "*Panahon sa mga Kwaknit*" showed corruption, a prevalent social issue in the Philippines and usually occurs in the government. Corruption can also be seen in the balak, "*Kujog*" and "*Panahon sa mga Kwaknit*." It is also a prevalent social issue in the Philippines, which usually occurs because of vote-buying and manipulation of government officials. Social injustice was shown in the balak, "*Kujog*," which occurs because of vote-buying.

The Marxist themes relate to the present Philippine condition and social issues that are true and relevant up to this day. The study recognizes the value of literature in the real world. Ponte's balak is a literary work that reflects the impoverished situation of ordinary people, particularly people with low incomes. He described what he saw in the reality that the Philippines is continually suffering at the hands of its citizens. The corrupt and supreme power does not guarantee the country's survival as a whole in the hands of a few. For this reason, Ponte used his balak to portray a picture to promote social consciousness. He clarifies that the morbidity of class struggles and social inequalities in Philippine society needs to be understood.

### Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

### Funding

This work was not supported by any funding.

### Declaration

The author acknowledges the use of Artificial Intelligence (AI) tools in the preparation of this paper. Specifically, ChatGPT AI was utilized to translate Ponte's *balak* from Cebuano Bisaya to English, ensuring greater accessibility for readers unfamiliar with Cebuano.

### ORCID

Mary Grace Restaura – <https://orcid.org/0009-0009-3989-8771>

Judelyn Cahucom – <https://orcid.org/0009-0001-3984-3924>

Sheilamae Gallo – <https://orcid.org/0009-0003-2608-5428>

Deije Acero – <https://orcid.org/0009-0008-1822-6768>

Arlene Loquias – <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6182-0454>

### References

- Abrea, R. (2023, September 5). *A look at how corruption works in the Philippines*. Inquirer Business. <https://business.inquirer.net/390650/a-look-at-how-corruption-works-in-the-philippines>
- AllAboutWorldview.org. (2021). *Marxist economics*. <https://www.allaboutworldview.org/marxist-economics.htm>
- Batalla, E. V. (2020). Grand corruption scandals in the Philippines. *Public Administration and Policy*, 23(1), 73–86. <https://doi.org/10.1108/PAP-11-2019-0036>
- Canare, T., & Mendoza, R. U. (2022). Access to information and other correlates of vote buying and selling behaviour: Insights from Philippine data. *Journal of Interdisciplinary Economics*, 34(2), 139-161. <https://doi.org/10.1177/02601079211034607>

- Commission on Higher Education. (2017). *CMO No. 75, s. 2017: Policies, standards, and guidelines for Bachelor of Secondary Education (BSEd) programs*. Commission on Higher Education. <https://ched.gov.ph/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/CMO-No.-75-s.-2017.pdf>
- Foley, B. (2019). *Marxist literary criticism today*. Pluto Press. <https://www.plutobooks.com/9780745338835/marxist-literary-criticism-today/>
- Freedom Socialist Party (2020, March 31). *Corruption: Part and parcel of the capitalist system*. Freedom Socialist Party. <https://socialism.com/fs-article/corruption-part-parcel-capitalist-system/>
- Gatcho, A. R., & Delorino, P. P. (2019). Reading short stories of F. Sionil Jose using Marxism as a literary vista. *International Journal of English Language and Translation Studies*, 7, 76–86.
- Gherghina, S., Saikkonen, I., & Bankov, P. (2021). Dissatisfied, uninformed or both? Democratic satisfaction, political knowledge and the acceptance of clientelism in a new democracy. *Democratization*, 29(2), 211–231. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13510347.2021.1947250>
- Ibardeloza, K.B., Badillo, L.T., Macatangay, J.H., Dela Cruz, K.R. & Malabanan, M.P. (2022). Students' exposure to social media and their radical involvement on the societal issues in the Philippines. *International Review of Social Sciences Research*, 2(1), 47-60. <https://doi.org/10.53378/352878>
- Manifesto of the communist party — Bourgeois and proletarians. (n.d.). <https://faculty.uca.edu/rnovy/M&E--Manifesto%201,2,4.htm?fbclid=IwAR0ZajlPECUUyXwGzlaU741byl2G6Qb4xFJ8vdWqQ78ugA6xY0eNVrRTQ1U>
- Mapa, C. D. (2022). *Philippine Statistics Authority*. Republic of the Philippines. <https://psa.gov.ph/statistics/poverty/node/167972>
- Marx, K., & Engels, F. (2002). *The communist manifesto*. Penguin Publishing Group.
- Nartey, M., & Mwinlaaru, I. N. (2019). Towards a decade of synergising corpus linguistics and critical discourse analysis: a meta-analysis. *Corpora*, 14(2), 203–235. <https://doi.org/10.3366/cor.2019.0169>
- Ndi, A. (2020). Do life forces construct consciousness? Rethinking Karl Marx's Theory in knowledge economy of creative literature. *Cross-Currents an International Peer-*

- Reviewed Journal on Humanities and Social Sciences*, 6(11), 142–154. <https://doi.org/10.36344/ccijhss.2020.v06i11.004>
- Ponte, R. E. (2019). *Hagawhaw nga salibagjaw, mga balak*. Self-published.
- Ranaldi, M., & Milanović, B. (2022). Capitalist systems and income inequality. *Journal of Comparative Economics*, 50(1). <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jce.2021.07.005>
- Snider, S. (2019). *Economic inequality: What it is and how it impacts you*. US News & World Report. <https://money.usnews.com/money/personal-finance/family-finance/articles/economic-inequality-what-it-is-and-how-it-impacts-you>
- Transparency International. (2021). *What is corruption?* Transparency International: The Global Coalition Against Corruption. <https://www.transparency.org/en/the-organisation>
- Trading Economics (n.d.). *Philippines Corruption rank*. <https://tradingeconomics.com/philippines/corruption-rank>
- Tuano, P. A., & Cruz, J. (2019). Structural inequality in the Philippines: Oligarchy, immobility, and economic transformation. *Journal of Southeast Asian Economies*, 36(3), 304–328. <https://doi.org/10.1355/ac36-3C>
- Wisman, J. D. (2024). How the bourgeoisie's quest for status placed blame for poverty on the poor? *Cambridge Journal of Economics*, beae040. <https://doi.org/10.1093/cje/beae040>
- Yujie, Z., Yasin, M. a. I., Alsagoff, S. a. B. S., & Hoon, A. L. (2022). The mediating role of new media engagement in this digital age. *Frontiers in Public Health*, 10. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpubh.2022.879530>
- Zhang, S. & Foley, B. (2021). The new development of Marxist literary criticism today: An interview with Barbara Foley. *Theoretical Studies in Literature and Art*, 41(2), 97-105. <https://tsla.researchcommons.org/journal/vol41/iss2/10>