DOI 10.47176/kurmanj.7.3.1

Original Article

SRPH

KURMANJ, 2025; 7(3): 1-6

Representation of "Metropolis-Satellite" Relationship in John Steinbeck's *The Pearl*

Raziye Karimpoor Boldaji

Department of Humanities and Social Sciences, Kharazmi University, Iran

***Corresponding Author:**
karimpoor.r@kharazmi.ac.ir

Received: 11 June, 2025
Revised: 23 August, 2025
Accepted: 18 September, 2025
Published: 27 September, 2025

ABSTRACT

In John Ernst Steinbeck's The Pearl, the family's futile attempt to lift up from poverty and enhance their social class level is a representation of the peripheral countries' struggle to gain independence from the core countries in order to cease being looted and controlled by them. Applying dependency theory by Andre Gunder Frank with respect to the history of the setting in which the selected work is narrated, this paper sheds light on a new aspect of the novel by finding a relationship between the protagonist and his family's case and the unjust and oppressive state of the peripheral countries according to the core countries.

Keywords: peripheral countries, metropolis-satellite, Andre Gunder Frank, John Steinbeck, The Pearl

Introduction

All human beings have experiences in life whose instances can be traced in literary works. According to Jones (1968), through literature, which is the product of imagination, one can look at life and their surroundings in a different way and discover new manifestations [1]. It is a record of what happened not only to an individual or family, but to a nation. John Steinbeck's stories, whether in the form of novels or plays, are one of the best and most well-known examples of showing these experiences. Steinbeck writes for the poor and downtrodden and creates real characters that evoke sympathy from readers, Lihua says (2005) [2]. He portrays the point of view of this segment of society and becomes their voice.

The Pearl is steeped in the history of oppression of indigenous Mexicans. It depicts a family who are unable to take their child to the doctor and save him after being bitten by a scorpion. The father of the family feels powerlessness in front of rich people with all his heart and tries to get a pearl to sell it and pay for his son's treatment. They are given the world's largest pearl. However, neither the powerful people nor the system they live in will allow them to sell the pearl and get out of their low status. The Pearl is the story of the struggle of the powers and the loss of the weaker, which is tied to a repression that has historical roots.

Objective of the Study

The main objective of this study is to gain a new perspective on The Pearl by John Steinbeck based on Andre Gunder Frank's ideas on dependency theory and world system theory [3,4]. To reach this purpose, the researcher of the study aims to identify the connection between the "metropolis-satellite" relationship defined by Frank and the protagonist's status versus the bourgeoisies' in the selected work. The researcher also attempts to correspond the dual society theory with the condition of the setting in the novel and finally, to find the reason of protagonist's failure by using the critiques on modernization theory.

Review of Literature

As far as this study is concerned, there are three previous works which have been effective as a guide for the current research. The first work is "The Unsuccessful Class Struggle as Represented by Kino's Experience in John Steinbeck's The Pearl" by Rut Arsari Christy [5]. In her research, Rut Arsari first investigates theories such as class struggle, hegemony, repressive state apparatus (RSA) and ideological state apparatus (ISA), and then based on these theories, describes the society in which

[Downloaded from kurmanj.srpub.org on 2026-11-26]

[DOI: 10.47176/kurmanj.7.3.1]

Publisher: Scientific Research Publishing House (SRPH), Shirvan, Iran
http://srpub.org
Email: kurmanj@srpub.org

Kino lives and explains in minute details the relations between people of one group with each other and with another group. The essay shows how Kino, as a representative of the poor and proletarian society, fails in the war with the bourgeoisie. However, it does not display the equivalent state of the protagonist and the peripheral countries. The researcher employs Rut Arsari's essay since it deals with the Marxist aspect of the novel and examines it according to the economic and political situation of Mexico at that time.

In regard to the history of Mexico, the work "Historical Context of The Pearl: Steinbeck's Vision of Mexico" by Melinda Knight explains in detail the political and social developments in the land between its independence from Spain in 1821 to the beginning of the Mexican Revolution in 1911[6]. She also describes the relationship between John Steinbeck and Edward F. Ricketts and their similar beliefs on individual and group behavior. This essay is applied in the paper for its comprehensive reference to the socio-economic history of the Mexico, though it does not apply dependency theory by Andre Gunder Frank to the selected work.

The last work "Critical Analysis of Steinbeck's The Pearl: Power and Silenced Voice" is written by Adaninggar Septi Subekti and focuses on the power relations between the dominant voices and silenced marginalized people in the selected work by utilizing critical literacy framework which is used to open new perspectives and viewpoints on the texts and help analyzing works from various approaches [7]. The research pays attention to the meaning every object or person in the novel conveys, like rifles and gunpowder and how a prejudiced racist society will silence the voice of the indigenous people and block their way to prosperity.

Research Questions

What is the connection between the "metropolis-satellite" relationship defined by Andre Gunder Frank and the protagonist's status versus the bourgeoisies' in The Pearl by John Steinbeck?

How does the protagonist accept and hence display the modernization theory in the process of the story? And what does his failure demonstrate about the truth of this theory?

How can one define the role of city in The Pearl and which signs of dual society theory are displayed in the selected work?

Theoretical Framework

The representation of "dependency theory" by Andre Gunder Frank is traceable in The Pearl by John Steinbeck. Born in 1929 and from a German background, Andre Gunder Frank was one of the radical economist and political activists whose works on the development studies and international relations are highly innovative in the field. He is best known for his "dependency theory" (1966) and "world system theory" (1993) which are in line with Immanuel Wallerstein, Giovanni Arrighi, and Samir Amin's works.

According to Frank's "The Development of Underdevelopment," [8] our interconnected world has winner and loser countries, with the latter deliberately kept in a state of dependency and underdevelopment by wealthy nations, thus people of less-developed countries must not be blamed fully for the backwardness of their countries, since bigger hands played a role in determining their destiny. In Frank's view, countries like USA and UK have "core" nations who make elite "metropolis" and by exploiting "peripheral" nations keep them in the state of dependency and underdevelopment as "satellites." Developed nations will be richer and more prosperous by exploiting underdeveloped nations, using their cheap raw materials and labors and sucking economic surplus out of them. This exploitative relationship is maintained through colonization and control of international trade. Hence, the less-developed countries always look up at the Western status and ask for their aid.

Frank criticizes modernization theorists like Walt Rostow who see underdevelopment as a stage that poor countries must be passed through as they take on the values and practices of the developed countries, rather than a result of the capitalist exploitation. (1966) Frank claimed "I believe, with Paul Baran, that it is capitalism, both world and national, which produced under development in the past and which still generates underdevelopment in the present" (1967). He rejects the idea that underdeveloped countries are simply in a state that developed countries had passed through a long time ago and they need to adopt the structures of those above them to become civilized and wealthy. He instead advocates for independence from what he calls "the politics of diffusion" (1966) The term means to replace the systems, structures, and values of the peripheral country with those of capitalist hub or the metropole.

Frank also disputes the "dual society" theory, which assumes that capitalism is a positive force for good. This theory is related to countries with tangible differences in incomes and culture of its people. According to the dual society theory, one part of the society is seen as progressive, modern and civilized, like urban cities or metropoles, and the other part is primitive, rural and underdeveloped (1966) He further explains about the fallacy of the theory by quoting the words of The Secretary General of the Latin American Center for Research in the Social Sciences:

The privileged position of the city has its origin in the colonial period. It was founded by the Conqueror to serve the same ends that it still serves today; to incorporate the indigenous population into the economy brought and developed by that Conqueror and his descendants. The regional city was an instrument of conquest and is still today an instrument of domination. (1967)

[Downloaded from kurmanj.srpub.org on 2026-11-26]

[DOI: 10.47176/kurmanj.7.3.1]

The metropolis is a dominant entity that exploits its satellites. These satellites, in turn, can have their own satellites, creating a chain of exploitation. This structure serves as an instrument to extract capital or economic surplus out of its own satellites and transfer part of this surplus to the world metropolis: "Provincial capitals, which thus are themselves satellites of the national metropolis-and through the latter of the world metropolis-are in turn provincial centers around which their own local satellites orbit" (1966)
Although he borrowed his ideas from Marxism, he never considered himself a Marxist:

Indeed, a lively but fruitless debate ensued over whether I am an Orthodox Marxist, a Neo-Marxist, or neither. My answer has always been 'none of the above', for I never laid claim to any of these labels, nor did I wish to assent to or dissent from any such. (1966)

Frank emphasized the importance of studying history and the past to understand the causes of underdevelopment today. He assumed that understanding this history is crucial for formulating adequate development theory and policy. His ideas about the history of Latin America were quite effective in understanding the cause of their underdevelopment. His theory of "satellite underdevelopment" is evident in the relationship between European colonizers and countries like Chile and Brazil, as well as within their own domestic economies.

Discussion

As John Steinbeck wrote in the preface to The Pearl, "If this story is a parable, perhaps everyone takes his own meaning from it…", the selected work has the ability to be analyzed as a representation of the relationship between the metropolis and the satellite countries, which was elevated by Andre Frank, the economist and political activist in his dependency theory. He emphasizes the necessity of examining history in order to gain a better prospect of the effects that capitalism has had on peripheral countries.

Connection Between the Metropolis and Satellite: Colonizers and Kino

Although the protagonist, Kino, and the people of his race lived in the "brush" houses and had a complete separate community from the colonizers and "rich people who lived in the stone and plaster houses of the town" [9], it must not be inferred that there is no relation between these two groups, especially in terms of economic issues.
According to Andre Gunder Frank, the structure of capitalism is not limited to nation-nation relationships, but encompasses all capitalist exchanges. (1967) It may not seem so at the first glance, but the relationship between Kino and the pearl buyers is like the connection peripheral countries have to the core ones. Kino was trying to sell the pearl (natural resource) at a fair price so that he can change his place in society and reach a higher economic and social level. However, the pearl buyers who were Spanish took advantage of Kino's lack of knowledge and tried to buy his property at a lower price in order to make more profit by selling it to someone else at a higher price.
Kino found himself confronted by a number of pearl buyers, but in fact they all worked for the same person: "For there were not many buyers really—there was only one, and he kept these agents in separate offices to give a semblance of competition" [3]. This gave Kino the illusion that he has a choice and can go to other buyers if he is not satisfied with the price offered to him, but all the buyers offered him a low price in order to make Kino believe that his pearl is not worth more than this and will be satisfied to sell it at the low price. In this way, Kino and his race will always remain poor despite of having pearls, and the pearl buyers will get richer day by day.
The same relationship stands for the peripheral and core nations. The incorporation of satellites into the global system of capitalism makes peripheral countries dependent on the metropolis and creates an unequal relationship in which the economy of the satellite is under the control of the metropolis. Dependency theory argues that there are underdeveloped countries whose resources are extracted for the benefit of the core countries like USA and European countries. The peripheral countries function as producers and suppliers of raw materials or repositories of cheap labor [10].
It is not just a pearl buyer-pearl hunter relationship. Pearl buyers are themselves a small piece of the huge wheelwork which is called capitalism. Just as Kino is considered a satellite regarding to the pearl buyers and the doctor, the colonizers are in turn satellites of bigger metropolises. However, the provincial metropoles are as important as metropolitan centers like United States and Europe, for they, by being centers of intercourse, are also centers of exploitation that exacerbate the gap between different economical classes in society and create a disintegrated community, which is known as "dual society."

"Dual Society": Kino and the Colonizers

The difference between Kino's life in the brush houses and rich people in the urban city is evident even from the first pages of The Pearl. Although Frank did not consider himself a Marxist, but he also divided the society into the poor and the rich, just like the poor and rich countries. The gap between these two groups is immediately shown in the novel by the words "They came to the place where the brush houses stopped and the city of stone and plaster began…" [9]. The city to which the elements of capitalism are diffused is a place of cool gardens and church and the blinding plaza.

[Downloaded from kurmanj.srpub.org on 2026-11-26]

[DOI: 10.47176/kurmanj.7.3.1]

Not only the habitancy place of the two are separate, but their lifestyles are also totally different. Kino almost did not have anything valuable thing but his canoe which he inherited from his father. "It was very old. Kino's grandfather had bought it from Nayarit, and he had given it to Kino's father, and so it had come to Kino." It was their source of income and "the bulwark against starvation" [9]. The lower class gain their food by daily working. If the canoe got broken, Kino's source of income would be destroyed and he and his family will have nothing to continue living with.

Even a glance at the daily mails the both groups eat will demonstrate their class level. Kino ate a corncake and that was the only breakfast he has ever known. The doctor, on the other hand, had a cup of chocolate and sweet biscuit, even a bowl of cigarettes. Kino's house was devoid of any valuable or new furniture. He and his wife slept on the mat while the doctor sat on his high bed. Kino's old blanket and clothes which was washed thousand times and Juana's old skirt and the tears in her shawl made them to be immediately classified as poverty people. Meanwhile, the doctor had a gown of red watered silk that had come from Paris, a European and a core country, a metropolis whose development is the result of exploitation of satellites.

The contrast between the city and its people's lifestyle with the Indian Mexican's displays all the signs of a dual society. Theoreticians who support the dual society theory claim that this contrast is the result of capitalist ideas being diffused into one part of the land (urban city) and not the other (brush houses). therefore, the modernization theory must be put into action to stimulate "the development of underdeveloped countries and, within them of their most underdeveloped domestic areas" (Frank, 1966), the theory at which Frank and Marxists in general are against.

"Modernization Theory," Kino's Exploitation or Development?

Antonio Gramsci, the Italian communist, explains "hegemony" in his Prison Notebooks as a way that capitalist society and its ruling class control the majority of people not by force, but by consensual means through intellectual and moral leadership. It is a sort of deception in which the individual forgets his own desires and accepts dominant values as their own.

The modernization process will not happen successfully without a system behind it to make modern values seem acceptable. Hegemony makes people believe that such values are the only way to become civilized and accepted as an honorable part of society. The depiction of modernization theory in Kino's wishes in The Pearl is accompanied by his acceptance of the church and European culture values. Fulton, a researcher and lecturer in humanities, states that lower class people struggle to have a better life (1960) [11]. Modernization theory considers it possible only through accepting and implementing capitalist ideas.

As Kino found the greatest pearl in the world, he "could see dream forms" in the surface of it (Steinbeck, 1947). His first dream was to get married in the church. Church is an institution in service of the dominant group, in this case, the colonizers. When Christian values dominate a society, non-Christians are portrayed as inferior to Christians: "non-Christian faiths are inferior, or dangerous, or that… non-believers are immoral, sinful, or misguided" [12]. Therefore, even those who are not necessarily Christians feel obligated to do the things that Christians do, because Christianity is no longer a religion to believed in, but a sign of superiority and high culture. For this reason, Kino's first step towards modernization was to get married in church and baptize his son, Coyotito.

"We will have new clothes". This was Kino's second wish. He imagined Coyotito wearing a blue sailor suit from United States in their wedding ceremony at the church. The type of clothing is another thing that shows the level of civilization and culture of a person in a capitalist society. They can reveal someone's means or power: "By wearing police or army uniform, people can show to others that they have power in military. Then by wearing luxurious and expensive clothes, people show that they are rich" [5]. Kino's wishes for his family are so internalized in him that he is not aware of the fact that Western values are hidden in his dreams. The underdeveloped nations believe that the way to escape from their current situation is to accept and implement the ideologies of the metropolis. Theoreticians also believe that this current state of underdeveloped countries has been passed by the now developed countries a long time ago. Frank opposes this idea and emphasizes on the study of history of underdeveloped countries to find the roots of backwardness.

The land that is now known as Mexico has been dominated by Spanish colonialists for centuries. The land has been involved in rebellion and war against its colonizers, United States and France, for about two centuries before the time setting of The Pearl. As the result of these wars, many areas of Mexico fell into the hands of other countries. For example, the Mexican-American War, which lasted two years, resulted in Mexico losing almost half of its territory to USA.

Beside United States, the interventions and wars that France had in Mexico fueled the country's internal disputes and after many clashes, the country fell into the hands of a dictator named General José de la Cruz Porfirio Díaz Mori in 1876. The era that is known as Porfiriato, Díaz was elected president for seven time until 1911 [6]. He is mainly known for his efforts towards the modernization and industrialization of Mexico, which was unsuccessful.

[Downloaded from kurmanj.srpub.org on 2026-11-26]

[DOI: 10.47176/kurmanj.7.3.1]

Mexico produced raw materials, cheap labor, and agricultural products in exchange for goods that were produced elsewhere [13]. This means that the country was giving away its natural resources, without being able to make anything with them. Therefore, it was always dependent on the metropolis countries for its supplies and products: "This system became an extension of colonialism, whereby natural resources are sent out of the country and returned as finished goods from a mercantile economy" [6].

In the last term of Díaz's presidency, ninety percent of the rural population had lost their lands due to the wrong policies that were taken for the development of the country and historians agree that the rural standard of living was worse in 1910 than it was a century earlier. In this chaotic situation, the president fled to Spain [6].

As Frank states "historical research demonstrates that contemporary underdevelopment is in large part the historical product of past and continuing economic and other relations between the satellite underdeveloped and the now developed metropolitan countries" (1966), the historical context of The Pearl is not limited to its own time, but is the result of centuries of colonialism, dictatorship, economic instability, etc.

Kino's failure in achieving his dreamlike goals is a critique to modernization theory which assumes that in order to progress, it is enough to follow the ideology of metropolis. Metropolis itself is the reason for the satellite's backwardness in the first place by exploiting its resources. Furthermore, when metropolis notices that satellite is struggling to get free from subordination, it does everything to keep the satellite dependent, even at the cost of repression, carnage, and intrigue.

Conclusion

John Steinbeck's The Pearl is a representation of the relationship between the metropolis and the peripheral countries in the light of Frank's dependency theory. Just as the metropolis countries buy the natural resources of the peripheral countries at a low price and keep them in a state of deprivation and backwardness, the pearl buyers also intended to buy the pearl so cheaply, and when failing to do so, the hunters who were another group of colonists went after Kino and his family and blocked his path to happiness. Kino is like the peripheral countries who, with the illusion of modernization, try to sell their resources at a high price and rise above the class system, but he is faced with injustice, deception and violence, because the survival of this system is to keep Kino in his low state. In order to keep its subjects contentedly in place and continue to survive, this system internalizes its values in the subjects. Kino looks up at the urban city as an idealized place in which only rich people are allowed to live. This dual society makes the protagonist willing to adopt metropolis values in order to be accepted in the city. For this reason, even Kino's wishes are in line with the approval of the capitalist society, such as nice clothes, marriage in the church, etc.

Kino and the peripheral countries both had a strong motivation to progress and improve their situation, but due to the lack of sufficient knowledge and power, as well as the continuous aggression and interference of the colonial countries, they could not use their natural resources and not only did not progress, but also lost things that were valuable to them. Kino lost his child, and peripheral nations surrender their natural resources, freedom, and old customs.

References

1. Jones, Edward H. (1968). Outlines of Literature. New York: The Macmillan Company.

2. Lihua, Chen. (2005). A Marxist Perspective to John Steinbeck's of Mice and Men. China: Central China Normal University.

3. Frank, Andre Gunder. (1967). "Capitalism and Underdevelopment in Latin America: Historical Studies of Chile and Brazil." New York: Monthly Review Press 48(3). Print.

4. Frank, Andre Gunder, and Barry K. Gills. (1993). The World System: Five Hundred Years or Five Thousand? London: Routledge, 3-48. Print.

5. Christy, Rut Arsari. (2013). "The Unsuccessful Class Struggle as Represented by Kino's Experience in John Steinbeck's The Pearl." Satya Wacana Christian U, Salatiga, 18.

6. Knight, Melinda. (2019). "Historical Context of The Pearl: Steinbeck's Vision of Mexico." Salem Press, 2-3.

7. Subekti, A. S. (2017). Critical analysis of Steinbeck's The Pearl: Power and silenced voice. International Journal of English Language Teaching and Linguistics, 2(1), 15-28.

8. Frank, Andre Gunder (2002). "The Development of Underdevelopment." Monthly Review 18(4), 37. Print.

9. Champney, Freeman. (1947). John Steinbeck, Californian. The Antioch Review, 345-362.

10. Namkoong, Y. (1999). "Dependency theory: concepts, classifications, and criticisms." International Area Review 2(1), 121-150. https://doi.org/10.1177/223386599900200106.

11. Fulton, Robert Brank. (1960). Original Marxism Estranged Offspring. Boston, U.S.A: The Christopher Publishing House. 89. Print.

[Downloaded from kurmanj.srpub.org on 2026-11-26]

[DOI: 10.47176/kurmanj.7.3.1]

12. Blumenfeld, W. J. (2006). Christian Privilege and the Promotion of "Secular" and Not-So "Secular" Mainline Christianity in Public Schooling and in the Larger Society. Equity & Excellence in Education, 39(3), 195–210. https://doi.org/10.1080/10665680600788024
13. Fehrenbach, T. R. (1973). Fire and Blood: A History of Mexico. Massachusetts: Da Capo Press, 470. Print.

KURMANJ

Copyright: © 2025 The Author(s); This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

Citation: Karimpoor Boldaji R. Representation of "Metropolis-Satellite" Relationship in John Steinbeck's The Pearl. KURMANJ, 2025; 7(3): 1-6.

https://doi.org/10.47176/kurmanj.7.3.1

[Downloaded from kurmanj.srpub.org on 2026-11-26]

[DOI: 10.47176/kurmanj.7.3.1]