

# A Marxist Feminist Study in Walter Tevis' *The Queen's Gambit*

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## Abstract

The present research sheds light on Walter Tevis' *The Queen's Gambit* (1983) from a Marxist feminist perspective. This theory explores how gender ideologies of femininity and masculinity structure production in capitalism. By making the use value of reproductive labor visible, this theory contests the dominance of capitalist value in determining social values, including the exchange value in wages and the surplus value of profit. This study examines the movement's forerunners and Marxist feminist thoughts in the context of *The Queen's Gambit* by Walter Tevis. *The Queen's Gambit* is a story of an orphan girl, Beth, who is a genius at a chess game. In the 1950s, chess was allowed for men only, not women. However, Beth tries to prove herself in such a masculine world through a chess game, which she does through her success at the novel's end.

**Keywords:** *Feminism, Marxism, Marxist feminism, the Queen's Gambit.*

## 1. Introduction

Marxist Feminism is a movement that is considered a response to and a critique of capitalism and liberal political theory, where Marxist feminism adds gender to the analytic consideration of a Marxist. Even though Marx never created a theory of gender, feminists looking for an approach that could explain the causes of women's oppression from a class perspective looked to his writings in the 1970s and discovered an alternative Marxist theory. As a result, a theoretical revolution has altered Marxism and Feminism.

This theoretical revolution shows that understanding the significance of women's unpaid domestic work to the creation of the labor force redefined not only domestic work but also capitalism itself and the fight against it. So, this theoretical revolution involved turning Marx upside down to elevate his efforts for feminism (Federici, 2018, p.468). Engels (1820- 1895), one of the most influential figures in this movement, helped introduce the foundations for a Marxist understanding of women's oppression. Consequently, the present study aims to examine this movement, show its originality, and exemplify it in Tevis' *The Queen's Gambit* (1983).

Walter Tevis (1928-1984), a novelist and short story writer, was born in San Francisco. Sports and the American psyche intrigued him (Mitgang, 1984). Tevis entered the University of Kentucky, getting B.A. and M.A. degrees in English literature (Tevis, 1985). He wrote more than five novels; for instance, he wrote *The Color of Money* (1984), *The Steps of Sun* (1983), and *The Mockingbird* (1980). Some were later adapted into films; for example, he wrote *The Hustler* in 1959, which became the film

starring Paul Newman. Then he penned *The Man Who Fell to Earth* (1963), later adapted into a David Bowie-starring film (Mitgang, 1984).

*The Queen's Gambit*, published by Tevis in 1983, is a remarkable and engaging tale about an orphan's rise to stardom in chess. A Kentucky orphan who excels at chess is the latest unexpected subject Tevis has chosen to appeal to his readers' compassion for. The story traces her professional journey from an orphanage basement to the pinnacles of international chess. Despite the various variations, big and small, Beth Harmon will remind many readers of Bobby Fischer. Despite being a principled loner, she is an incredibly talented player who wins her state's title in her first match, quickly dominates American chess, and competes against the finest players in the world before the age of twenty. She faces several challenges along the way, not the least of which is her penchant for booze and tranquilizers. (Hill, 2020).

The current study explores this book as a tale that takes place in the 1950s to 1960s when women were supposed to be defined as spouses and mothers. Although many women do not particularly enjoy this role, some are still entirely content with it. They have been discouraged from having professions or other activities that might take them away from their homemaking responsibilities. Beth Harmon, the story's heroine, is not a typical woman in the world of *The Queen's Gambit*; instead, she is a chess genius, in contrast to the other women, who must keep their mouths shut, put up with injustice, and submit to a patriarchal society where males are in charge. The men in Harmon's life will always stick by her, although she has a history of being unpleasant and self-centered (Homan, 2020).

According to Hohman (2020), *The Queen's Gambit* is also a story about drug misuse in the 1960s, complicated Cold War ties, and women's growing influence in chess. As a result, the foundation of this research is a look at Marxist Feminism's history and core ideas and showing the impact of this concept on Tevis' *The Queen's Gambit*.

## 2. Marxism Movement

Karl Marx (1818–1883) is an economist, social theorist, philosopher, and author. He is a prominent thinker and well-known for his ideas on capitalism, socialism, and communism. Marx is famous for his revolutionary writings that support communism and socialism (Kenton, 2023).

In the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Marx created the Marxist theory or Marxism. Originally, Marxism included three ideologies: an economic and political program, a theory of history, and a philosophical anthropology. Marx examined the causes, complications, and economic, social, and political dimensions of class struggles and conflicts. His research on class conflict was influenced by the writings of English economist David Ricardo, who lived in the 17<sup>th</sup> century (Kenton, 2023).

Marxism has changed throughout history. It can be divided primarily into early Marxism (1878-1917), primarily in Europe. It examined European society during the German Social Democratic Party's administration. Marx studied a class-segregated society composed of bourgeois and proletariat members. In a capitalist society, the proletariat was the working class of laborers who received compensation for their labor, whereas the bourgeoisie were those with concentrated power. Marx disagreed with the theory of capitalism and how it created society. He referred to it as "reductive economics." Middle Marxism (1917- 1968) broadened its scope to cover the entire world. It investigated Soviet society under the communist government and late Marxism (1968-1991), which investigated the state of the whole society during the Cold

War. The collapse of the communist parties and the regrettable resurgence of capitalism and imperialism were among the events covered (Choudhury, 2022).

During the revolutionary movements, Marxism concentrated on repairing the damage caused by Stalin's administration. Rebels struggled to choose the right cause to fight for concerns like the difficulties of the proletariat, women, colored people, ethnic groups, sexual minorities, etc., because of many issues at the time. After several fruitless attempts, Marxist thought advanced further and attempted to alter the manner of dealing with the topics rather than the subjects themselves (Choudhury, 2022).

Consequently, Marxist philosophy began concentrating on the "production of human life." Marxism recommended both direct and indirect methods for producing human life. It directly advocated collective self-governance. From lowest to highest, this was the hierarchy and allocation of authority. The second strategy for production relations was indirect. This strategy discussed how individuals might influence societal decision-making. It discussed the significance of parliamentary capitalism, political meddling, etc., in social decisions (Choudhury, 2022).

Marxism emphasizes the economic facts that shape human culture before misinterpreting it. Marxism holds that all social and political endeavors, including those involving government, the arts, science and technology, the media, and other fields, aim to obtain and maintain economic power. Therefore, economics is the foundation upon which social, political, and ideological realities are superimposed. Because economic power always includes social and political power, socioeconomic class is often used by modern Marxists to describe the class structure instead of the economic class (Tyson, 2006, pp. 53-54).

In Marxist terms, economic circumstances are material circumstances, and the social, political, and ideological environment they create is the historical situation. According to the Marxist critic, understanding human works, such as nuclear submarines, television shows, and political or personal events, is only possible with awareness of the unique material and historical contexts in which they are produced. In other words, everything that happens worldwide has precise material and historical causes. Therefore, the distribution and dynamics of economic power are central to the Marxist explanation of human events and productions, which also examines relationships between socioeconomic classes within and among countries. (Tyson, 2006, P.54).

Marx was equally concerned about the effects of capitalism on human values as he was with the development of a capitalist economy. An object's worth becomes impersonal in a capitalist economic system. The word "capital" refers to money, and its value is converted into a monetary "equivalent" that is wholly based on how it interacts with a financial market (Tyson, 2006, pp. 61-62).

## 2. Feminism Movement

Feminism is both a theoretical viewpoint and a social movement. It explains social behavior and phenomena from a theoretical perspective, especially those that pertain to gender. As a social movement, feminism seeks to advance gender equity in society (Renzetti, 2008, p.369).

Feminist theories came in many different forms. Nevertheless, they all examine how gender subordination affects women, the causes of women's oppression, how gender inequality is maintained, and various solutions to gender inequality. According to liberal feminism, women's oppression is brought on by their unequal access to

institutions of the law, society, politics, and the economy. Their solution promotes women's equal legal rights and involvement in public areas like employment, politics, and education (Jones & Budig, 2008, p.370).

According to radical feminism, sexuality is the root of women's oppression. They contend that social institutions like medicine, religion, abuse, and objectification regulate how women's bodies are used. Radical feminists claim that mandatory heterosexuality and the abolition of patriarchy are necessary to end gender discrimination and that sexism is the most prevalent and ancient oppression. By giving women more power over their bodies, including changing how they experience sexuality, childbirth, and motherhood, this would be made possible (Jones & Budig, 2008, p. 370).

Psychoanalytic feminism addresses gender inequality using Freudian theories. Developing theories that examine women's experiences with their emotions, bodies, and sexuality, psychoanalytic feminism aims to eliminate the male bias present in psychoanalytic theory. Theorists contend that early experiences, mainly due to the distinct roles of men and women within the family, mold women's psyches and produce differences between men and women. They contend that the phallus, representing masculine authority, rules Western civilization. An androgynous culture is required for solutions, which might be achieved through dual parenting (Jones & Budig, 2008, p.370).

By focusing on Western colonization, postcolonial feminism expands on intersectionality. Modernization and economic restructuring have led to sexism in this context, which involves exploiting women as workers and as sexual objects. They emphasize the roles played by women in communities as moms who may use their influence to promote girls' education, access to quality healthcare, and environmental protection (Jones & Budig, 2008, p.370).

Women, in the opinion of many feminist theorists and literary critics, should use inherently patriarchal frameworks, such as psychoanalysis and Marxism, with extreme caution. These frameworks are seen as patriarchal because they incorporate many aspects of patriarchal ideology. For instance, Freud felt that women have "penis envy" and often mistake their first-born boys for "penis substitutes" to make up for their absence because he used the male experience as the norm against which he assessed the female experience. Marx had some insightful ideas about how economic forces shape the lives of both sexes, but he was unaware of how males have repressed women regardless of their economic status (Tyson, 2006, p. 93).

However, because they find these theories helpful in analyzing issues pertinent to women's experience, many feminists incorporate components of psychoanalysis and Marxist theory as well as other critical theories. In order to comprehend the psychological repercussions of patriarchal ideology and how and why women and men internalize it, psychoanalysis might be utilized. Marxism can also be utilized to understand better how patriarchal legislation and custom have controlled economic forces to put women in a position of economic, political, and social underclass oppression (Tyson, 2006, p. 93).

Feminists share several critical presumptions that can be summed up as follows: Economically, politically, socially, and mentally, patriarchy oppresses women, and patriarchal ideology is the primary tool to maintain this oppression. Further, in every field where patriarchy rules, women are seen as the other; they are objectified, marginalized, and defined solely concerning how they deviate from male norms and

values—specifically, what they (supposedly) lack compared to what males (allegedly) possess (Tyson, 2006, pp. 91-92).

### 3. Marxist Feminism

Marxist feminism is a subset of feminist theory and politics that draws theoretical inspiration from Marxism. Its critique of capitalism characterizes it as a system of institutions, practices, structures, incentives, and sensibilities that encourages the exploitation of labor, alienation of people, and diminution of freedom (Stefano, 2015, p. 1).

Empowerment and equity for women cannot be attained within the confines of capitalism, according to Marxist feminists. At least two reasons for this; first, the subordination of women is a result of the human creation of private property, of which capitalism is the most recent development. Second, the ownership and control of the means of production generate antagonistic class divisions between those who do and those who do not (Stefano, 2015, p. 1).

Marxism has been analyzing unpaid, reproductive "women's work" as a crucial component of capitalism since the 1840s. To better comprehend how reproduction and production have changed over time, Marxist feminism looks at the relationship between the two— theorized revolutionary subjectivity and opportunities for an anti-capitalist future through Marxist feminism. The ideas of imperialism and primitive accumulation, or theft, of land, resources, and women's unpaid labor to reproduce lives and generations are particularly significant to Marxist feminism. From the 1930s, Marxist feminism in the U.S. began to call for more focus on the political and economic aspects of systematic racism, sexism, and class exploitation (Armstrong, 2020).

Socialism and Marxism-inspired feminism blame capitalism for the gender gap. They contend that male individuals and capitalists exploit women's unpaid domestic and reproductive work. Women are used as a disposable, low-wage labor force in reserve. Marxist feminists assert that patriarchy is a product of capitalism and will disappear. Patriarchy and capitalism, according to socialist feminists, are two different forms of oppression. They demand reforms in access to education, healthcare, economic possibilities, and political power, in addition to redistributing responsibilities and altering family relationships (Jones & Budig, 2008, p.370).

Marx has made an indirect contribution to feminism. It can be seen in his methods, his materialist understanding of history, and his examination of the exploitation of labor by capitalism. His methodology has provided the tools and the categories that allow them to think together about gender and class, feminism, and anti-capitalism. As feminists, they are persuaded that they cannot end gender oppression unless they change society from the bottom up. However, because Marx never created a theory of gender, his input is indirect. Since his earliest writings, there have been numerous statements in his works that show a comprehension of the significance of gender relations and denounce the subjugation of women in a capitalist society, particularly in the bourgeois family. Marx and Engels; investigated the family as the focus of women's oppression and as a tool for capitalism's continued exploitation of women's unpaid reproductive labor (Federici, 2018, p. 469).

Generally speaking, Socialist feminists have sought to establish sex and gender as salient categories of capitalist oppression since the earliest translations of Marxist theory into revolutionary action, contending that being a woman bound to patriarchal institutions like marriage is comparable to being a working-class laborer bound to the wage.

Marx has influenced generations of socialists as a proponent of "women's emancipation" through participation in social production, primarily interpreted as industrial labor. In contrast, feminists who were outraged by housework, domesticity, and their economic dependency on men turned to Marx's writings in the 1970s in quest of a theory that could explain the causes of women's oppression from a class perspective. As a result, both Marxism and feminism underwent a theoretical revolution (Federici, 2018, p.473).

Among the writings that contributed to this revolution were Mariarosa Dalla Costa's (1975) analysis of domestic work as the primary means of producing labor-power or Selma James' (1975) placement of the housewife on a continuum with the "wageless of the world," who have nonetheless been crucial to the process of capital accumulation, the redefinition of the wage relation by other activists of the movement as a tool for the naturalization of entire areas of exploitation and the establishment of new proletariat hierarchies (Federici, 2018, p.472).

The "household debate"—which presumably centers on whether housework is productive—includes all these theoretical advancements and the discussions they have sparked (Federici, 2018, p.472).

Another influential figure in the socialist feminist adoption of Marxist concepts is Friedrich Engels. Engels opens the door to a broad range of analysis regarding the material conditions of women's lives and labors by demonstrating how much marriage is about the maintenance and expansion of the property. During the American civil rights and feminist campaigns of the 1960s, interest in Marxist concepts was renewed (Lee, 2020).

Engels (1972) is one of the most significant early influences on Marxist/socialist feminism, even if it is not expressly characterized as such (initially published in 1884). Engels (1972) believes that women's potential for domestic and sexual reproductive work became a crucial commodity as early human groups grew agrarian and the concept of private property became increasingly tied to inheritance. Structural discrimination in gendered and sexual forms of class due to the economic reliance it causes (Lee, 2020).

Subsequently, during this time, new feminist and antiracist theories, as well as systemic inequality analyses, start to emerge. The application of Marxist critique to environmental deterioration is perhaps the most recent work by socialist feminists, in collaboration with other activists and theorists, that is both truest to Marx's original intent and shows the relevance of his ideas to the future fortunes of human societies. (Lee, 2020).

#### 4. Synopsis of the Novel

The novel is told from the perspective of a classic third-person past narrator who stays close to Beth Harmon, the protagonist. When her mother died in a car crash, Beth was eight years old. Beth was brought to The Methuen House orphanage because her father had already passed away, and she had no other family members. She is an orphan who eventually discovers a passion for chess after being introduced to the game by the orphanage's janitor, Mr. Shaibel. Here, she also quickly develops an addiction to drugs, which helps her "visualize" her game before securing her win.

Beth quickly proves herself to be a chess prodigy, and we eventually see her wiping out opponent after opponent in various chess competitions before gaining international fame as a highly-skilled female chess player.

## 5. Analysis

Marxist Feminism can be seen in this novel through its setting, which takes place during the Cold War, a period of geopolitical tension between the U.S. and the Soviet Union and their allies, which begins right after World War II. It is a classic Cold War, sports coming-of-age story. At that period, the second wave of Feminism flourished and dominated the scene, especially in the United States and across the Western world, which began in the early 1960s and lasted roughly two decades.

1. Listening to the two of them, she had felt something unpleasant and familiar: the sense that chess was a thing between men, and she was an outsider. She hated the feeling (Tevis, 1983, p.149).
2. Found herself thinking furiously of the seven thousand dollars she had paid Allston Wheatley. She loved her money; she and Mrs. Wheatley had taken great pleasure in accumulating it from tournament to tournament, watching it gather interest (Tevis, 1983, p.265).
3. What could any American teach her? She had moved past them all. She was on her own. She would have to bridge the gap herself that separated American chess from Russian (Tevis, 1983, p.267).
4. Furthermore, what did be women have to do with it? She was better than any male player in America. She remembered the Life interviewer and the questions about her being a woman in a man's world. To hell with her; it would not be a man's world when she finished with it (Tevis, 1983, p.270).
5. Beth Harmon has established herself as the queen of American chess. To find out, to show the world that if America has outgrown its inferior status in world chess, she will have to go where the big boys are. She will have to go to the Soviet Union (Tevis, 1983, p.271).
6. Borgov's hair was ruffled, and there was a grim smile on his face. He spoke in English. "It is your game." He pushed back his chair, stood up, and reached down and picked up his king. Instead of setting it on its side, he held it across the board to her. She stared at it. "Take it," he said (Tevis, 1983, pp. 356-57).

As mentioned previously, the context of the novel is a man-dominant world, the Cold War, and the allusions to Communism & Soviet Union. However, Marxist feminism is explicit in this novel through chess and how women are treated in society. At that time, it was only men who played chess. Thus, Beth is seen as the only woman or female who could enter a man's world through the chess game, by her ability and intelligence; as we notice during that time, in the 1960s, women had just started getting their rights, and the feminist movement has started to emerge in the whole Europe.

Through the mentioned extracts, it has been noticed that Beth wanted to prove herself in that world that has no equality between men and women, as well as between black and white people, through the game of chess, by her insistence to win, and she did. Each time Beth played, she tried to show her power, strength, and ability over men. Further, Beth was trying to stand by herself to get whatever she wanted, and she could through the chess game.

Consequently, chess is the primary axis of the novel, in which, through it, women's power and ability have been proved. With chess, Beth could travel around Paris, Russia; she could wear the clothes that she liked, and she could buy a house to

live in, as she was living in an orphanage and then she was adopted; later, she could buy the house from the person who adopted her after telling her to leave his house and rejecting her as his legal daughter.

Likewise, through the family that had adopted Beth, Marxist feminism might be noticed, as the wife was neglected by the husband, treating her just like a housekeeper, being busy with his work, and not talking to her. So, he brought Beth to their house to get over his wife. Nevertheless, later we see that the wife; can reach her desire through the chess game.

As Marxist Feminism means women's mistreatment or utilization in a capitalist society, the researchers have shown the kind of exploitation in Tevis' novel; for instance, adopting Beth from the orphanage is exploitation because Mr. Wheatly, the man who adopts her, has not been in need for a girl, he wants to get rid of Alma, his wife. Mr. Wheatly mistreats his wife and does not give her that kind of respect and attention.

He uses his job as an excuse to keep himself away from home. At the same time, he keeps his wife at home only while he goes out, and he earns money for himself, not for his family. This is obvious in the novel when he travels, and his wife and Beth never see him again. When his wife dies, Beth calls him many times to come for the payment of burying his wife, yet, Mr. Wheatly does not come. Throughout the event of the novel, Mr. Wheatly comes to sell the house and gets Beth out of it. He rejects her as his daughter and confesses that he has adopted her only to shut Alma's mouth.

The same thing is with the wife, Mrs. Alma. Her exploitation of Beth is that when she and her husband have adopted Beth, Alma wants to busy herself with her. She makes Beth work to earn money and buy the things she likes. Nevertheless, we see later how Beth helps her to release herself from the loneliness that she has been living with her husband and helps her to achieve her dream, which is traveling to Paris and playing the piano.

Eventually, the whole mentioned events and the struggle of the woman to attain what she wants to happen during a time when the world struggles to gain money.

Finally, Marxist Feminism can be seen through the title itself, Beth is the queen who is gambling in a manly world, and finally, she has won.

## 7. Conclusion

The present research has studied Walter Tevis' *The Queen's Gambit* (1983) in terms of Marxist feminism. This theory investigates how production is shaped under capitalism by gender notions of femininity and masculinity. This theory challenges the supremacy of capitalist value in defining societal values, including the exchange value in wages and the surplus value of profit, by making the use value of reproductive labor evident. Tevis' *The Queen's Gambit* served as the backdrop for this study's examination of the movement's forebears and Marxist feminist ideas. The novel was about Beth, the main character, who was eight years old when her mother died in a vehicle accident. Because Beth had no other family members and her father had already passed away, she was brought to The Methuen House orphanage. She is an orphan who later develops a passion for chess after the orphanage's janitor, Mr. Shaibel, introduces her to the game. She also swiftly starts to become addicted to narcotics at this point, which helps her "visualize" her game and secure her victory.

This paper shows how Marxist feminism examined how capitalism and individual private property ownership are used to oppress women. Marxist feminists believed

that the only way to liberate women was to overthrow capitalism, where they claim that much of the work done by women goes unpaid. Marxist feminists expanded on conventional Marxist analysis by using it to analyze sex relationships and unpaid domestic work.

The Cold War, a time of geopolitical conflict between the U.S. and the Soviet Union and its allies that started soon after World War II, was the backdrop of this novel, and it provided an excellent opportunity to examine Marxist feminism—a classic coming-of-age tale involving athletics and the Cold War. The second wave of feminism, which started in the early 1960s and lasted for nearly two decades, blossomed and dominated the scene, especially in the United States and the Western world.

Through the game of chess and how women are treated in society, Marxist feminism was made apparent in this novel. Chess was a game played only by men at that time. Because of her skill and intelligence, Beth was viewed as the only woman or female who could infiltrate a man's world through the game of chess at that time in history—the 1960s—when women were only beginning to receive their rights and the feminist movement was beginning to take root over all of Europe.

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