Elitism and Class Struggle in *The Menu* (2022): Representations of Social Inequality and Resistance

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Abstract

This study aims to examine how social class discrimination is depicted in the film and how the main characters respond to and navigate such discrimination. This research employs a qualitative method to analyze the narrative, characters, and dialogue in the movie. The theoretical framework is based on social class theory by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels (1998) and discrimination theory by Robert A. Baron and Nyla R. Branscombe (2012). These theories are used to explore the dynamics of class hierarchy, power relations, and discriminatory practices represented in the film. The findings reveal that class divisions are portrayed through the contrast between the wealthy elite guests and the working-class individuals who serve them. The film illustrates how economic power shapes social interactions, reinforces elitism, and creates rigid hierarchical structures. Furthermore, the analysis demonstrates how the main character confronts and resists these class-based inequalities. Rather than conforming to the expectations imposed by the wealthy patrons or the restaurant's authoritarian system, she asserts her individuality and challenges the oppressive class structure. Ultimately, the study concludes that The Menu critiques social stratification by exposing the absurdity and cruelty of elitism, while highlighting resistance as a means of overcoming and escaping systems of discrimination.

Keywords: *discrimination, exploitation, rebellion, social class, the menu.*

A. Introduction

In today's modern world, the issue of social class-based discrimination remains a critical and persistent problem. Despite global efforts to promote equality, social hierarchies still deeply influence how people are treated and what opportunities are available to them. Individuals from lower social classes often face unequal treatment in terms of education, employment, and access to services, while those in higher social classes enjoy privileges that reinforce their status. Chancel et al. (2022) admitted these disparities are not only present in daily interactions but are embedded in systems and institutions, shaping societal structures and limiting upward mobility. The persistence of this issue raises important questions about power, privilege, and the fairness of contemporary social systems.

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The roots of social class-based discrimination can be traced through both historical and structural developments, where economic systems have long shaped the distribution of power and opportunity. Over time, capitalist frameworks have sustained and deepened class divisions by enabling wealth accumulation for a small elite while limiting access for the working class. These conditions foster social exclusion and reinforce a cycle of inequality that becomes difficult to break. The unequal distribution of resources often goes unquestioned, as social norms and institutional practices normalize the gap between classes. Media, education, and policy often reflect and reproduce these inequalities, further embedding them in everyday life (Bourdieu, 1984). To better understand this dynamic, it is essential to examine the theoretical perspectives that explain how class and discrimination operate within society.

Social class-based discrimination refers to unequal treatment of individuals based on their position within the social hierarchy. Inequalities among social groups are marked by domination from a significantly superior class or the exploitation of one social class by another. According to Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels (1988), "Society is divided into two main classes: the bourgeoisie, who own the means of production, and the proletariat, who must sell their labor to survive". This division creates an inherent conflict where the dominant class exploits the working class to maintain its power. Robert A. Baron and Nyla R. Branscombe (2012) further define, "Discrimination as negative behavior directed toward individuals from disadvantaged groups, rooted in societal stereotypes and prejudices". When applied to class, this means that people from lower economic or occupational backgrounds are often devalued, mistreated, or excluded simply because of their status.

This form of discrimination is evident in numerous real-life contexts. On social media, class divisions are frequently exposed through viral posts and trending hashtags. In Indonesia, the hashtag #kesenjangansosial (social disparity) gained widespread attention across TikTok, Instagram, and X (formerly Twitter). Users shared videos contrasting overcrowded electric commuter trains (KRL), where ordinary citizens struggle during daily commutes, with images of government officials traveling in luxury cars or private jets. These posts generated public outrage and intensified discussions about how structural inequality shapes everyday experiences, particularly in transportation and access to public facilities (Oktavia, 2025).

Educational inequality further illustrates how socioeconomic status determines access to opportunity. In the United States, debates surrounding tuition policies reveal how institutional decisions disproportionately affect marginalized communities. For example, several civil rights organizations, including the National Immigration Law Center and the ACLU of Texas, challenged a federal judge's ruling to suspend the Texas Dream Act (McCracken & Schwager, 2024). Since its enactment in 2001, this policy had allowed undocumented students—many of whom come from low-income immigrant families—to pay in-state tuition rates at Texas public colleges and universities. The suspension of this policy would significantly increase tuition costs, potentially adding hundreds or even thousands of dollars per semester. As a result,

many underprivileged students may be forced to delay or abandon their higher education due to financial constraints.

These examples demonstrate that social class–based discrimination is not merely a theoretical concept but a tangible social reality. It operates through economic structures, public policy, and everyday social practices that reinforce inequality. Ultimately, such disparities restrict social mobility and perpetuate systemic disadvantage, limiting equal access to education, transportation, and other essential resources for marginalized communities.

The issue of social class-based discrimination is also reflected in literary works and films, for example, The Menu (2022) directed by Mark Mylod. The movie presents the story of a group of wealthy guests who dine at an exclusive restaurant run by Chef Julian Slowik. As the dinner progresses, it becomes clear that the event is a critique of the guests' entitlement and exploitation of others. The movie highlights the separation between the upper and working classes through symbolic dishes, dialogue, and setting. It satirically exposes the arrogance of the elite and the invisible labor of the working class, making it a powerful medium for illustrating the realities of social class-based discrimination.

To examine these issues, this study applies Karl Marx's theory of social class as well as Baron and Branscombe's theory of discrimination as the theoretical frameworks. Marx's theory explains the structural imbalance and economic exploitation that arise from class divisions, while Baron and Branscombe's theory addresses the psychological dimensions of prejudice and biased behavior. These theories will be used to analyze The Menu in order to understand how the movie portrays social class-based discrimination and how the characters respond to or resist these structures. By combining both sociological and psychological perspectives, this study aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the depiction of social class-based discrimination in The Menu movie (2022).

B. Method

This study employs a qualitative approach to analyze the representation of social class–based discrimination in *The Menu* (2022). A qualitative method is appropriate because the research emphasizes interpretation of meaning, context, dialogue, scenes, and symbolic elements rather than numerical measurement. According to Bogdan and Biklen (1982), qualitative research is descriptive in nature, meaning that data are collected in the form of words and images instead of statistics. This approach enables an in-depth exploration of how discrimination and class hierarchy are constructed within the film's narrative. Qualitative research also focuses on understanding perspectives, values, and beliefs embedded in cultural texts, allowing the writer to interpret how characters experience and respond to social inequality.

The primary data source of this study is *The Menu* (2022), a 1-hour-and-47-minute film directed by Mark Mylod. The film was selected because its narrative structure and character dynamics strongly depict class division, elitism, and

exploitation. It critically portrays how wealthy individuals consume art, labor, and even human dignity without accountability, making it highly relevant to a study of social class discrimination.

Data collection was conducted through repeated viewings of the film to ensure comprehensive understanding. Significant scenes, dialogues, and visual symbols reflecting class disparity were carefully identified, marked, and transcribed. Supporting data were obtained from scholarly books and journal articles related to Marxist class theory and discrimination theory to strengthen the theoretical foundation of the analysis.

The data were analyzed descriptively using Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels' theory of class conflict alongside Robert A. Baron and Nyla R. Branscombe's theory of discrimination. Each selected scene was examined in relation to power imbalance, exploitation, marginalization, and resistance. The findings are presented thematically in narrative form, connecting cinematic elements—such as setting, characterization, and dialogue—to broader critiques of capitalism and social stratification. This systematic interpretation ensures a critical and coherent understanding of how the film represents structural inequality and class-based discrimination.

C. Findings and Discussion

The Menu (2022) is a psychological thriller film directed by Mark Mylod that centers on an exclusive fine-dining experience attended by a group of elite guests on a remote island. The movie follows Margot and Tyler, a young couple invited to dine at a prestigious restaurant led by renowned chef Julian Slowik. Although the restaurant promises an extraordinary culinary experience, the evening gradually reveals underlying tensions related to power, privilege, and social hierarchy. Set within a highly controlled and isolated environment, the film exposes how luxury spaces operate as sites of social exclusion, where economic status determines access, authority, and value. Despite its refined atmosphere, the interactions between the guests and the restaurant staff reflect deeper issues of social class-based discrimination. This context provides the foundation for analyzing class division and resistance depicted throughout the movie.

1. Social Class-Based Discrimination in *The Menu* (2022)

The findings indicate that *The Menu* (2022) portrays social class-based discrimination through the sharp contrast between the elite diners and the restaurant staff. The exclusive restaurant setting functions as a symbolic space of upper-class privilege, where access is limited to individuals who possess economic and cultural capital. This spatial separation reinforces hierarchical divisions, positioning the diners as dominant consumers and the staff as subordinate laborers. The discriminatory power relations within the restaurant are further emphasized through rigid rules imposed on both guests and workers. One notable example is when the staff states that

"there will be no substitutions," a line that reflects the absolute authority exercised within the dining system. This statement symbolizes how control operates in elite spaces, where compliance is demanded and individual agency is minimized. In accordance with Baron and Branscombe's (2012) theory, such rigid structures illustrate how discrimination emerges from unequal distributions of power and status.

The movie also highlights the invisibility of labor within elite consumption. Throughout the dining experience, the staff remain largely unnoticed unless they are serving food or explaining the menu. Their identities and emotions are suppressed in order to maintain an illusion of perfection for the elite guests. This depiction aligns with Marxist perspectives, which emphasize that capitalist systems tend to conceal the human cost of production while normalizing labor exploitation.

Symbolic elements, particularly the presentation of food, further reinforce class hierarchy. Dishes such as the "breadless bread plate" exemplify the absurdity of elitist consumption, where symbolism and status outweigh practical value.

Figure 1. The breadless bread plate as a symbol of elitist consumption in The Menu (2022).

The diners' unquestioning acceptance of such dishes demonstrates their internalization of elite ideology, reinforcing symbolic violence that sustains class dominance without overt coercion. The rigid structure of the dining experience also contributes to discriminatory practices. The guests are expected to follow specific rules, yet these rules ultimately serve to elevate the chef's authority and reinforce the hierarchy between those who control the system and those who are subjected to it. While the diners appear privileged, they too are trapped within an elite system that prioritizes performance and status over genuine human connection. This complexity highlights that class-based discrimination operates not only through material inequality but also through ideological control.

2. The Main Character's Response to Social Class-Based Discrimination

The findings also reveal that Margot represents resistance toward social class-based discrimination in *The Menu* (2022). Unlike the elite diners, Margot does not possess economic privilege, nor does she fully identify with the working-class staff. Her ambiguous social position allows her to critically observe the exploitative system

operating within the restaurant. Margot's resistance becomes evident through her refusal to accept the ideological values imposed by the elite dining experience. While the other guests comply with the symbolic rituals of luxury consumption, Margot questions their meaning and legitimacy. Her resistance culminates in a significant symbolic act when she states, *"I just want a cheeseburger."* This line represents a rejection of elitist values that equate exclusivity with superiority.

Figure 2. Margot's rejection of elitist dining culture through her request for a cheeseburger

By requesting a simple and accessible meal, Margot challenges the dominant class ideology embedded in the restaurant's culinary culture. The cheeseburger symbolizes authenticity, equality, and basic human needs, standing in contrast to the pretentious and exploitative nature of elite consumption. This act aligns with Marxist theories of resistance, where individuals oppose dominant ideologies by refusing to participate in oppressive systems.

Margot's interaction with Chef Slowik further demonstrates her agency. Unlike other characters who submit to his authority, Margot negotiates and challenges his control, disrupting the power dynamics that sustain the class hierarchy. Her eventual escape from the restaurant signifies liberation from the discriminatory social structure. This outcome emphasizes that resistance against class-based discrimination can emerge through individual awareness and moral refusal rather than blind conformity.

D. Conclusion

After completing the analysis, it can be concluded that this study examines how social class–based discrimination is depicted in *The Menu* (2022) and how the main characters respond to such inequality. The film presents a stark contrast between the wealthy guests and the restaurant staff, highlighting the rigid hierarchy that structures their interactions. Luxurious dishes such as the "Amuse-bouche" and the "breadless bread plate" function as metaphors for privilege and excess. The guests eagerly consume artistic yet superficial culinary creations, while remaining indifferent to the labor, creativity, and humanity of those who prepare them. In this way, the film mirrors real-world dynamics of class-based discrimination, where economic power enables exploitation and reinforces social dominance.

Although several characters passively accept the established hierarchy, Margot emerges as a figure of resistance. Positioned outside both the elite diners and the restaurant staff, she refuses to fully align herself with either group. Her request for a simple cheeseburger symbolizes a rejection of elitist pretension and performative luxury. By choosing authenticity over spectacle and ultimately escaping the restaurant, Margot asserts her autonomy and challenges the oppressive power structures that confine the other characters. Her act represents a refusal to participate in a system built upon class arrogance and exploitation.

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