



SATIRE AS SOCIAL CRITICISM IN JONATHAN SWIFT’S *A MODEST PROPOSAL* AND ITS RELEVANCE TO CONTEMPORARY NIGERIAN SOCIETY

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Abstract

This research investigates the use of satire as a means of exposing social and economic injustice in Jonathan Swift’s A Modest Proposal and considers its significance within the context of contemporary Nigerian society. Guided by Marxist literary theory as a theoretical framework supported by Sociological Criticism, the study examines how Jonathan Swift employs ironic reasoning to criticize class inequality, the commodification of human life, and the indifference of political and economic elites to the suffering of the poor. Through close textual analysis, the paper situates the essay within the historical conditions of eighteenth-century Ireland and draws parallels with present-day Nigerian realities marked by widespread poverty, unequal distribution of resources and ineffective governance. The findings suggest that Jonathan Swift’s satirical method remains relevant as a critical lens for understanding persistent social problems in Nigeria. The study ultimately affirms literature’s capacity to challenge dominant power structures and stimulate critical reflection on issues of social responsibility and reform.

Keywords: satire, social criticism, Jonathan Swift, Nigeria, Society

Introduction

Jonathan Swift’s *A Modest Proposal* is widely regarded as one of the most powerful examples of satirical literature in the English language. First published in 1729, the essay adopts an ostensibly rational and economic approach to the impoverishment of Ireland, ultimately proposing that the children of poor Irish families be sold as food for the wealthy elite—a suggestion that Jonathan Swift never intends to be taken literally but uses to shock readers into recognizing the severity of social problems and elite indifference (Britannica 2025). The grotesque nature of this proposal, delivered with a deadpan tone and meticulous structure, highlights Jonathan Swift’s mastery of satire as a tool to expose and critique systemic inequality, exploitation and the dehumanization of the poor. Scholars note that this satirical hyperbole serves to reveal ‘the cruel indifference of the ruling classes’ and to compel readers to confront the moral failure of contemporary society rather than endorse the absurd solution itself (eNotes).

In literary studies, satire has long been understood not merely as entertainment but as a potent form of social criticism. Satirists such as Jonathan Swift manipulate irony, exaggeration and shock value to reveal underlying social injustices and to call into question the ethical foundations of social institutions (Gilliam Writers Group). Through these techniques, Jonathan Swift forces readers to engage with the realities of poverty and exploitation, making *A Modest Proposal* a literary text that transcends its historical moment and continues to be relevant in discussions of social inequality and governance.



The persistence of such social issues in different contexts raises questions about the universality of Jonathan Swift's condemnation. In contemporary Nigeria, for instance, widespread poverty, unequal wealth distribution and the perceived neglect of political leadership reflect ongoing challenges that mirror, in part, the conditions Jonathan Swift satirized in eighteenth-century Ireland. Nigerian scholars and commentators have attributed similar patterns of elite self-interest and structural neglect to ongoing socio-economic disparities, suggesting a continuity of conditions that makes Jonathan Swift's literary work a useful lens for modern analysis. By examining the mechanisms of satire and its thematic resources, the paper aims to demonstrate that *A Modest Proposal* remains a valuable resource for understanding and evaluating contemporary socio-economic issues.

Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded primarily in Marxist literary theory, which examines literary texts as products of the economic, political and social structures of their time. Rooted in the historical materialism of Karl Marx, Marxist criticism contends that literature cannot be separated from the class conditions and power relations that shape its production and content. As Terry Eagleton explains, Marxist criticism goes beyond simply noting class references; it seeks to interpret a literary work's forms, styles and meanings as outcomes of specific historical and material conditions (Terry Eagleton quoted in Marxist literary criticism). In this view, literature functions as part of the cultural "superstructure" that both reflects and reinforces the dominant ideology rooted in the economic "base" of a given society, including class relations and social inequality (Marxist literary criticism). Marxist theories therefore prioritize analysis of class struggle, exploitation and ideological formations to uncover how literary texts either challenge or uphold existing power structures.

Marxist literary criticism is particularly useful for analyzing Jonathan Swift's *A Modest Proposal* because Jonathan Swift's use of satire reveals entrenched socioeconomic injustice and the attitudes of the elite toward the poor. By foregrounding class dynamics and power, Marxist theory enables an interpretation of Jonathan Swift's exaggerated proposal as a criticism of economic exploitation and indifference to human suffering, connecting the literary text to issues such as class inequality and elite dominance. The theoretical work of figures such as Raymond Williams and Fredric Jameson further supports this perspective, emphasizing the importance of situating literature within its broader social structures as socially symbolic acts (Fredric Jameson 1981: 36).

While Marxist theory focuses on class and economic determinants, Sociological Criticism provides a contemporary lens by examining how literary texts function in and comment upon their larger social environment. Sociological criticism situates literature within the social structures, cultural norms and collective experiences of its time, assessing how literary texts both reflect and shape societal values and behaviours (Sociological Criticism). This approach enables the examination of how *A Modest Proposal* not only articulates individual rhetorical strategies but also poverty, social stratification and public policy, making the connection between Jonathan Swift's satire and conditions in contemporary Nigerian society.

By combining Marxist literary theory with Sociological criticism, this research underscores the social dimension of literary meaning and aligns the interpretation of Jonathan Swift's satire with real-world sociopolitical conditions. This dual theoretical framework facilitates a deeper understanding of how literature not only mirrors societal injustices but also potentially influences readers' perceptions of similar issues in societies outside of Jonathan Swift's historical context, such as Nigeria.

Literature Review



The satirical impact of Jonathan Swift's *A Modest Proposal* has inspired extensive scholarly discussion, focusing not only on its literary artistry but also on the broader social implications. Central to these discussions is the recognition that Jonathan Swift's essay transcends mere humour to become a powerful critique of systemic injustice and dehumanizing economic ideologies. Jonathan Swift's grotesque suggestion – that impoverished Irish children be sold and consumed-functions as a metaphor highlighting the indifference of the powerful toward the suffering poor (Britannica). Such extremity reflects a purposeful strategy designed to jolt readers beyond complacency and expose the moral vacuity of exploitative social attitudes. Scholars have noted that Jonathan Swift's deliberate "dark humour... forces the reader into moral discomfort", revealing the elite's habitual commodification of the vulnerable under the guise of rational policy discussion (Azizi Wafia Wardah and Otong Setiawan 2025: 1968).

A significant strand of criticism attends to Jonathan Swift's use of irony and rhetorical violence as mechanisms that transform satire into social indictment. The calculated contrast between the narrator's claim, systematic tone and the horrific content destabilizes the reader's expectations, provoking recognition of real injustice disguised in rational-seeming arguments. As one analysis explains, Jonathan Swift's method "mimics the detached, analytical approach of those who proposed solutions to poverty without considering their moral implications, thus satirizing not only the poverty itself but the *logic* that sustains inequality (Research Essay.com). This indicates that Jonathan Swift's satire is not arbitrary, but a deliberate parody of economic and policy discourse – a point that aligns with the Marxist focus on exposing how elite ideologies rationalize exploitation.

In addition to critiques centered on ironic and rhetorical strategies, researchers have examined *A Modest Proposal* through lenses of historical context and social hierarchies. Jonathan Swift wrote in an era of devastating poverty under British Colonial rule, where the Irish population endured economic disenfranchisement and social marginalization. One study highlights how the essay reflects "the language of colonial and racial hierarchies used to justify domination, slavery and economic exploitation" and interprets Jonathan Swift's extreme proposal as an allegory for colonial systems that strip subjects of humanity (Wafiq Aziz Wardah: 2025: 1965). This perspective resonates with postcolonial readings while also intersecting with sociological criticism, as both frameworks emphasize how literature mirrors entrenched power dynamics and social structures.

Another important line of scholarship foregrounds the enduring relevance of Jonathan Swift's satire for contemporary societies. Critics argue that while the specific conditions of eighteenth-century Ireland differ from modern contexts, the underlying patterns of economic inequality and elite indifference persist globally. This continuity makes Jonathan Swift's approach a fruitful site for examining current social problems, including poverty and class conflict. For instance, several commentators emphasize that Jonathan Swift's "mock proposal" remains pertinent in debates about poverty and policy as it compels modern readers to interrogate how economic reasoning can devalue human dignity when detached from ethical considerations (Literopedia).

Despite the richness of existing literary works, gaps remain in research but explicitly bridges Jonathan Swift's satire with contemporary socio-economic considerations outside the Western context. While many critics acknowledge the universal relevance of Jonathan Swift's themes, comparatively fewer studies systematically explore how his methods illuminate the dynamics of post-colonial states such as Nigeria, where poverty, governance challenges and elite-masses tensions are prominent. Thus, this paper contributes to the field by extending the critical conversation into comparative socio-cultural territory, using the combined lenses of Marxist and sociological criticism to show how *A Modest*



Proposal can inform understandings of inequality and social indifference beyond its historical origins.

Class Inequality, Poverty and Governance in Literary and Social Contexts

Jonathan Swift's *A Modest Proposal* remains one of the most provocative literary examinations of class inequality and socio-economic injustice. Through the deliberate use of exaggerated logic and irony, Jonathan Swift exposes how the ruling class often approaches poverty as an economic inconvenience rather than a human crisis. Early in the essay, Jonathan Swift describes poor Irish children as a "charge upon their parents or country" (Jonathan Swift 2016: 5), a phrase that immediately signals the dehumanizing perception of the poor. By adopting the voice of a detached economist, Jonathan satirizes policymakers who reduce human life to cost and utility.

This representation of the poor as expendable resources aligns with Marxist interpretations of class exploitation. Karl Marx argues that in class-stratified societies, the ruling class maintains power by converting human labour-and, by extension, human existence-into economic commodities (Karl Marx 1990: 172). Jonathan Swift's narrator extends this logic to an extreme by suggesting that children themselves become commodities, thereby exposing the moral implications of unchecked capitalist reasoning. In contemporary Nigeria, similar patterns are observable where large populations experience poverty amid wealth concentration among political elites. Economic politics often prioritize growth statistics while neglecting human suffering, echoing the same utilitarian critiques Jonathan Swift makes.

Jonathan Swift's satire also challenges narratives that portray poverty as an individual failure. Instead, the essay implies that poverty is structurally produced. The narrator notes that poor mothers are "forced to employ all their time in strolling to beg sustenance for their helpless infants" (Jonathan Swift 2016: 6), suggesting systemic neglect rather than personal irresponsibility. Sociological critics argue that literature often reflects social structures that shape human behavior, rather than merely individual moral choices (Alan Swingewood, 1972: 13). This perspective applies to Nigeria, where poverty persists due to institutional failures such as corruption, unemployment, and inadequate social services rather than lack of effort by the poor.

Governance and political responsibility form another central concern in *A Modest Proposal*. Jonathan Swift's narrator presents his proposal with mathematical precision and apparent benevolence, claiming it will "prevent those voluntary abortions" and reduce the number of Catholics (Jonathan Swift 2016: 9). The cold rationality of this reason satirizes political leaders who justify harmful policies using technical language. Terry Eagleton observes that satire often "exposes ideology by mimicking its own language to absurd extremes" (Terry Eagleton: 2002: 34). Jonathan Swift's method reveals how governance rooted solely in efficiency and profit can lead to moral collapse.

In the Nigerian political landscape, policy discussions frequently rely on economic data and political rhetoric while minimizing the lived realities of citizens. Scholars of African political economy note that elite governance often prioritizes power consolidation over social welfare, resulting in persistent inequality (Claude Ake 1996: 45).

Jonathan Swift's essay, though centuries old, offers a framework for criticizing such leadership practices by revealing how policy divorced from ethical responsibility can legitimize exploitation:

It is a melancholy object to those who walk through the great town, a travel in the country, when they see the streets, the roads, and cabin-doors crowded with beggars of the female sex,



followed by three, four, or six children, all in rags and importuning every passenger for an alms.

These mothers, instead of being able to work for their honest livelihood, are forced to employ all their time in strolling to beg sustenance for their helpless infants:

Who, as they grow up, either turn thieves for want of work, or sell themselves to the Barbadoes (Jonathan Swift 2016: 1).

For, as things now stand, how they will be able to find food and raiment for a hundred thousand useless mouths and backs? (Jonathan Swift 2016: 4).

Furthermore, *A Modest Proposal* exposes the self-interest of the elite. Jonathan Swift remarks that landlords “have already devoured most of the parents” (Jonathan Swift 2016: 10); this metaphor underscores economic exploitation. Fredric Jameson argues that literary texts encode social conflicts symbolically, allowing readers to uncover “the political unconsciousness” (Fredric Jameson 1981: 20). Jonathan Swift’s metaphor thus symbolizes a system in which elites consume the labour and dignity of the poor:

Some persons of a desponding spirit are in great concern about the number of poor people who are aged, diseased, or maimed; and I have ben desired to employ my thoughts what course may be taken to ease the nation of so grievous an encumbrance. But I am not in the least pain upon that matter, because it is very well known, they are every day dying and rotting, by cold and famine, and filth and vermin, as fast as can be reasonably expected (Jonathan 2016: 6).

Ultimately, Jonathan Swift’s satire functions as both a mirror and a warning. By exaggerating the logic of exploitation, *A Modest Proposal* forces readers to recognize the ethical dangers of systems that normalize inequality. The continued relevance of these themes in Nigeria demonstrates literature’s capacity to transcend historical boundaries and interrogate enduring social realities.

Conclusion

The study has demonstrated that Jonathan Swift’s *A Modest Proposal*, though rooted in the socio-political realities of eighteenth-century Ireland, continues to speak meaningfully to contemporary societies grappling with inequality, poverty and governance failures. By framing satire as a deliberate strategy of social criticism, the research has shown that Jonathan Swift’s *A Modest Proposal* operates not merely as a literary artifact but as an enduring critical tool capable of interrogating persistent patterns of exploitation and indifference across different historical and cultural contexts.

One of the most significant insights arising from this study is the recognition that satire functions as a form of ethical provocation. Jonathan Swift’s exaggerated logic does not offer solutions in the conventional sense; rather, it exposes the moral consequences of viewing human suffering through purely economic or political lenses. When applied to contemporary Nigerian society, this satirical approach encourages a deeper interrogation of policies and leadership practices that prioritize numerical success, political convenience, or elite advantage over human dignity and social justice. The relevance of Jonathan Swift’s method lies in its ability to disrupt complacency and challenge normalized injustice.

Furthermore, the comparative perspective adopted in this research underscores the cyclical nature of social inequality. Despite differences in time, geography and governance structures, both Jonathan Swift’s Ireland and modern Nigeria reveal how entrenched class divisions and ineffective governance can perpetuate poverty. This continuity suggests that literary texts like *A Modest Proposal* offer more than historical commentary; they provide frameworks for understanding how power operates and how social systems repeatedly fail marginalized populations.



Finally, this study affirms the role of literature as a critical social mirror—one that not only reflects societal problems but also demands ethical accountability from readers and leaders alike. By connecting Jonathan Swift’s satire to contemporary Nigerian realities, the research reinforces the idea that literary criticism can contribute meaningfully to broader discussions of social responsibility, governance and reform. Future studies may further expand this approach by examining how satire in African literature similarly confronts social injustice, thereby deepening the dialogue between literature and lived experience.

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