

**A Marxist Analysis of Class, Alienation, and Love in *Anora***

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**Abstract**

This paper offers a Marxist reading of *Anora*, examining how the film represents love, class, and urban alienation in contemporary New York. It argues that *Anora* challenges the idea of romance as a private or liberating force by showing how intimate relationships are shaped by economic inequality, class power, and capitalist social relations. New York is presented not merely as a setting but as an active urban space that produces anonymity, precarity, and emotional distance, particularly for working-class subjects. Through close textual analysis, the paper explores how the film depicts working-class alienation in everyday life, where social bonds are fragile and emotional labour often goes unnoticed. *Anora*'s work as a sex worker is shown as a form of commodified labour embedded within the city's economies of pleasure and consumption, offering limited autonomy while exposing her to disposability and control. Drawing on Marx's concept of alienation and Engels's critique of bourgeois marriage, the paper demonstrates how love in the film functions as an attempted escape from alienation that ultimately fails. Central to the analysis is the film's subversion of the Cinderella narrative. While romance initially appears to promise class mobility and security, this fantasy collapses when elite interests are threatened, revealing the rigidity of class boundaries and the indifference of upper-class power. By contrasting instrumental elite relationships with moments of care among working-class characters, *Anora* exposes the limits of romantic idealism under capitalism. The paper concludes that the film presents love in the modern city as fragile and uneven, constrained by class difference and urban alienation rather than capable of overcoming them.

**Keywords:** Urban Alienation, Class, Love and Capitalism, Marxism, Class Mobility

**Introduction**

New York City has long occupied a central place in cinematic representations of modern urban alienation. As James A. Clapp argues, the city repeatedly appears in film as a

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space that produces social estrangement, psychological fragmentation, and moral uncertainty, particularly for those who exist outside structures of stability and privilege (Clapp 1). Its scale, anonymity, and economic inequality generate conditions in which intimacy becomes fragile and belonging remains provisional. Love, rather than offering refuge from these pressures, is often revealed to be deeply entangled with them.

Urban alienation is inseparable from class. The modern city promises opportunity, freedom, and mobility, yet it also intensifies economic disparity and social distance. As Marx argues, alienation under capitalism emerges when social relations are reorganised around commodity exchange rather than human need, producing estrangement not only from labour but from other people and from oneself (Marx). In the urban context, this condition is spatially intensified. Individuals live in close proximity while remaining strangers to one another, with limited biographical knowledge or emotional accountability (Clapp 5).

Relationships are shaped by access to resources, visibility, and power, as economic position determines who can afford stability, privacy, and recognition. Intimacy and love, therefore, do not unfold on equal ground but are mediated by structural inequalities that privilege certain forms of emotional expression while rendering others disposable. Literature and cinema have repeatedly returned to this tension, using romance as a narrative space to portray class conflict.

This paper examines *Anora* as a contemporary articulation of this tradition. Set in New York, the film explores love, marriage, and desire within the material conditions of working-class life and elite excess. The film follows a young sex worker whose brief marriage to the son of a Russian oligarch appears to promise transformation and escape. Yet this promise is systematically dismantled as the narrative exposes the limits of romantic idealism under conditions of entrenched class power.

Crucially, *Anora* subverts the familiar Cinderella narrative that has long structured cinematic romance. While the film initially gestures toward the fantasy of class mobility through love, it ultimately reveals this fantasy as unsustainable. Romance does not overcome inequality. Instead, it exposes the rigidity of class boundaries and the indifference of elite power toward those below it. By situating its love story within New York's landscape of inequality and anonymity, *Anora* presents romance not as transcendence but as a site where class difference is realised and intensified. This paper argues that the film offers a stark portrait of love without ascent, revealing how urban modernity renders intimacy vulnerable to the same forces of disposability and control that govern work, housing, and social life.

### **Working-Class Alienation and the City of Strangers**

For most of human history, social life was organised around small groups such as clans, extended families, or close-knit village communities. Within these settings, people generally possessed some biographical knowledge of those they interacted with on a daily

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basis. Social relations were shaped by familiarity, repeated contact, and shared histories, which limited the experience of anonymity in everyday life.

The emergence of large cities fundamentally altered this condition. Urban growth brought together diverse populations within dense spaces, changing how individuals related to one another. As cities expanded, everyday interactions increasingly took place between people who lacked any personal or biographical connection. This condition of urban life is clearly reflected in *Anora*. The film depicts New York as a space where people live in close proximity yet remain largely unknown to one another. Anora shares domestic space with a roommate, yet her emotional life, labour, and even her prolonged absences go largely unnoticed. This lack of inquiry is not framed as cruelty or negligence but as a normal feature of urban coexistence. As Clapp notes, “as cities became larger and more socially heterogeneous, the numbers of people who were strangers, and literally alien to one another, increased commensurately and exponentially” (Clapp 5).

Marx’s concept of alienation offers a useful framework for understanding how love functions in *Anora*. Under capitalism, human relationships are shaped by competition, insecurity, and the commodification of labour. As Marx argues, workers are alienated not only from the products of their labour but also from one another, since survival depends on selling labour power in competition with others (Marx). This condition weakens solidarity and places limits on emotional life. Love emerges as a private refuge from exploitation, yet it remains constrained by the same material conditions that produce alienation in the first place.

*Anora* visualises this contradiction through the protagonist’s working-class life in New York. Anora’s labour as a sex worker is explicitly commodified, and her survival depends on constant exchange. This economic reality shapes her emotional world. Her relationships are provisional, time-bound, and shaped by money, mobility, and power. The city offers anonymity and opportunity, but it also ensures that social bonds remain fragile. Anora’s isolation reflects Marx’s claim that alienation separates individuals from one another even when they live in close proximity.

The relationship between Anora and Vanya initially appears to offer escape from this alienation. Marriage promises stability, recognition, and a release from economic precarity. In Marxist terms, love here functions as an attempted negation of alienation, a space where individuals hope to affirm themselves, feel at home, and escape the pressures of competition. However, the film shows that this escape is illusory. The relationship is structured around convenience rather than solidarity. Vanya seeks freedom from parental control, while Anora seeks security and mobility. Once the marriage threatens elite property and reputation, it is quickly dissolved. Love is tolerated only as long as it does not interfere with capital.

This failure reflects Marx's argument that bourgeois love cannot overcome alienation because it remains embedded within capitalist relations. The upper-class family in *Anora* treats marriage as an instrument for maintaining wealth and lineage rather than as an emotional bond. Anora's feelings are rendered irrelevant when they conflict with property and inheritance. The indifference shown toward her confirms that elite intimacy is governed by ownership and control, not mutual recognition.

### **Portrayal of Women's Labour**

Anora's identity is inseparable from her work as a sex worker, which structures her time, her relationships, and her emotional availability. The film refuses to sentimentalise this labour or frame it as an individual moral failing. Instead, sex work is situated within the broader conditions of working-class survival under capitalism. Anora's choices are shaped by economic necessity rather than desire or transgression. Her labour is presented as ordinary and routinised, embedded in the rhythms of urban life and the demands of making a living in an unequal city.

At the same time, the film exposes how women's labour is consistently devalued and denied recognition. Although Anora's work generates pleasure, profit, and convenience for others, it offers her little stability or protection. Her employer doesn't provide her with benefits such as health insurance, and her labour is tolerated only as long as it remains private, transactional, and easily replaceable. The moment she attempts to convert intimacy into legitimacy through marriage, her position becomes untenable.

The figure of the sex worker is central to the film's critique of the city itself. Historically, the modern city has often been imagined as a contemporary Babylon, associated with excess, moral ambiguity, and sexual transgression. As Clapp observes, "The City, especially the big city, has been indicted, tried and convicted as the destroyer of community, family, religion, and other institutions of social harmony and cohesion" (Clapp 3). *Anora* draws on this tradition while refusing its moral judgement. Sex work is neither sensationalised. It is presented as labour fully embedded within the city's economies of pleasure, money, and consumption. Yet the city offers no lasting protection to those who perform this labour. The autonomy it provides is real but fragile, shaped by precarity and easily withdrawn. Urban freedom in the film is therefore not a form of liberation but a conditional state that leaves working-class women especially vulnerable.

### **Reverse Cinderella and the Failure of Class Mobility**

At the narrative level, *Anora* initially appears to rehearse one of the most persistent fantasies of romantic cinema: the Cinderella story, in which romantic love offers passage across class boundaries. The union between Anora, a working-class sex worker, and Vanya, the wealthy son of a Russian oligarch, seems to promise transformation through love, marriage, and legal recognition. However, the film systematically dismantles this fantasy, staging what may be read as a reverse Cinderella narrative in which romance not only fails to enable class mobility but actively exposes the rigidity of class power.

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Classical Cinderella narratives depend upon the belief that personal virtue, authenticity, or romantic sincerity can override economic difference. *Anora* initially gestures toward this logic. Yet the film makes clear that this fantasy is sustained only so long as it remains inconsequential. The moment the marriage threatens to produce material or legal repercussions—inheritance, redistribution of wealth—it is swiftly nullified. The oligarchic family functions as the guarantor of this reproduction, intervening to ensure that romance does not disrupt the circulation of capital. The annulment sequence marks the decisive collapse of romantic illusion. Despite Anora's legal status as a wife and her emotional investment in the relationship, her claims are rendered illegible once class power asserts itself.

### **Class Indifference and the Limits of Romantic Idealism**

*Anora* stages romance within a framework where class difference is never incidental but structurally decisive. The relationship between Anora and Vanya, at the beginning, appears to promise emotional connection across economic boundaries. Initially, Anora is drawn to the material comfort and symbolic possibility that Vanya's wealth represents, while Vanya seeks escape from parental authority and the obligations attached to inherited capital. Love, in this context, does not function as a transformative force; rather, theirs is a marriage of convenience.

This fragile equilibrium collapses the moment the relationship threatens elite interests. The intervention of Vanya's family exposes the deep indifference of the upper classes toward those positioned below them. Anora is not recognised as a legitimate partner but reduced to a source of shame and reputational damage. Her emotional claims carry no weight once property, lineage, and family prestige are placed at risk.

Despite these structural realities, Anora continues to invest in the fantasy that love can override class power. Her belief that Vanya's parents will understand because they love their son reflects a persistent attachment to the Cinderella narrative. The film presents this hope not as foolishness but as ideological conditioning. Romantic cinema has long taught its protagonists, particularly women, that love can humanise power. *Anora* exposes the limits of this belief by showing how elite affection remains conditional and tightly disciplined by inheritance and reputation.

Although Vanya initially performs rebellion against his family, he remains deeply shaped by privilege. His immaturity and dependence become evident when he is confronted with real consequences. Faced with parental authority, he retreats without resistance. Anora, in this sense, functions less as a partner than as an object through which he temporarily satisfies his desire for pleasure, freedom, and defiance. Once this fantasy collapses, she becomes expendable. The film thus reframes romantic failure not as personal betrayal but as a structural inevitability shaped by class power.

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The emotional centre of the film shifts away from Vanya toward Igor, whose position within the same economic class as Anora allows for a different mode of relation. Igor lacks wealth, mobility, and institutional power. The final scene, set in his grandmother's old car, is stripped of glamour and aspiration. Anora's breakdown in his arms does not signal resolution but recognition. It is the first and only moment in the film where intimacy is not mediated by transaction or power.

This contrast recalls Friedrich Engels's critique of the bourgeois family in *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*. Engels views the bourgeois family not as a space of genuine emotional connection but as an institution created to safeguard private property and maintain social hierarchy. He argues that monogamous marriage under capitalism presents itself as a union based on love, while in reality it is shaped by class interests, inheritance, and economic calculation. According to Engels, relationships among the working class hold greater potential for sincere romantic attachment because they are not organised around the protection of property. For Engels, however, even this possibility remains limited under capitalism, and genuine love can only be fully realised in a society no longer governed by ownership and profit motives (qtd. in Illouz 6–7). *Anora* echoes this insight without idealising poverty. The final image offers no redemption or escape. It offers only emotional truth. Love fails in the film not because it is insincere, but because under conditions of extreme inequality, it is permitted only when it poses no threat to wealth, reputation, or power.

### **Conclusion**

This paper has argued that *Anora* offers a powerful critique of love, class, and urban alienation by situating romance firmly within the material realities of capitalist modernity. Drawing on a Marxist framework and Clapp's understanding of New York as a cinematic site of alienation, the analysis has shown that the film treats love not as a private or transcendent experience but as one shaped by economic inequality, class power, and urban anonymity. The city emerges as an active force that structures intimacy, produces distance, and limits the possibilities of emotional connection, particularly for working-class subjects. Through its depiction of everyday working-class life, *Anora* reveals how urban alienation operates at both social and intimate levels. Relationships are marked by fragility, provisionality, and emotional invisibility. The city's density does not generate community but instead reinforces estrangement, allowing individuals to coexist as strangers. Anora's labour as a sex worker further exposes how capitalism commodifies not only work but also intimacy, embedding desire within circuits of exchange while withholding recognition and protection from those who depend on such labour for survival.

The film's treatment of romance is central to its critique. By reversing the Cinderella narrative, *Anora* exposes the illusion that love can function as a vehicle for class mobility. The marriage between Anora and Vanya temporarily suspends class difference, but it collapses the moment it threatens elite property, inheritance, and reputation. This collapse

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reveals the indifference of the upper classes toward emotional claims that challenge structural power. Romantic failure in the film is therefore not a matter of individual betrayal or moral weakness but a consequence of entrenched class relations.

The contrast between elite intimacy and Anora's final interaction with Igor further sharpens this critique. While the former is governed by convenience, ownership, and control, the latter allows for a brief moment of emotional recognition unmediated by power or aspiration. This contrast recalls Engels's critique of bourgeois marriage and reinforces the film's suggestion that capitalism places severe limits on the possibility of genuine love. Ultimately, *Anora* presents love in the modern city as fragile, uneven, and deeply constrained by material conditions.

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