

POWER, MORALITY, AND THE AMERICAN DREAM IN THE GODFATHER: A THEMATIC AND PSYCHO-SOCIOLOGICAL ANALYSIS

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Subxonova Nozigul Maqsud qizi

*English filology department,
Bukhara State University
n.m.subxonova@buxdu.uz*

Abstract

This paper explores Mario Puzo's *The Godfather* as a complex study of morality, power, and the pursuit of the American Dream. By combining thematic, psychoanalytic, and sociocultural perspectives, it investigates how the novel redefines the traditional understanding of family, justice, and capitalism in postwar America. The analysis suggests that Puzo's portrayal of the Corleone family transcends the conventions of crime fiction, offering instead a meditation on the psychological mechanisms of authority and the socio-economic structures of ambition. The study concludes that *The Godfather* dramatizes a paradox at the heart of American identity – success achieved through moral compromise.

Keywords

The Godfather, morality, power, family, capitalism, American Dream, Mario Puzo

1. Introduction

Mario Puzo's *The Godfather* (1969) remains a central text in twentieth-century American fiction, not only for its depiction of organized crime but for its psychological and cultural depth. Set against the backdrop of mid-twentieth-century America, the novel reveals how family loyalty and capitalist ambition intersect in morally ambiguous ways. Puzo's portrayal of the Corleone family examines the very contradictions that shape American identity – loyalty and betrayal, law and corruption, idealism and survival.

This paper aims to reinterpret *The Godfather* through three intersecting lenses: thematic, exploring its treatment of family, morality, and power; psychoanalytic, analyzing its depiction of authority and repression; and sociocultural, examining how capitalism shapes identity and ethics. The combination of these perspectives situates Puzo's work not merely within popular culture, but within the serious discourse of literary modernity.

2. Methodology

The study employs qualitative textual analysis to explore symbolic, psychological, and sociological dimensions of *The Godfather*. The analysis draws on three critical approaches:

1. Thematic Analysis: Identification of recurring motifs such as family, loyalty, and moral duality.

2. Psychoanalytic Reading: Examination of the father-son dynamic and the transformation of Michael Corleone as an Oedipal narrative.

3. Marxist-Sociological Interpretation: Exploration of the novel as an allegory of capitalist ethics.

Passages from the novel are studied for how they construct and reinforce these dimensions through language, characterization, and narrative pattern.

3. Results / Findings

In *The Godfather*, the Corleone family is both a literal and metaphorical institution. It represents protection, hierarchy, and control – a self-contained system with its own laws and justice. Don Vito Corleone’s authority extends beyond paternal affection; it functions as a moral and political order that substitutes for a corrupt society’s failure. The family thus becomes a microcosm of power in modern America, where loyalty replaces legality and affection masks coercion. Michael Corleone’s trajectory illustrates the psychological cost of power. Initially detached from his father’s world, Michael is drawn into it through a mixture of duty and vengeance. His transformation symbolizes the collapse of individual morality under systemic pressure. Violence, once portrayed as necessity, evolves into habit and identity. The narrative blurs distinctions between good and evil, exposing morality as a social construct contingent on circumstance and survival.

The Corleones’ enterprise mirrors American capitalism. Their operations – contracts, negotiations, and strategic alliances – resemble corporate mechanisms. The Mafia’s code of loyalty functions as an alternative form of capitalist discipline, where family allegiance substitutes for legal accountability. Puzo’s insight lies in equating criminal success with the ethos of business: the ruthless pursuit of profit, the manipulation of networks, and the illusion of respectability.

4. Discussion

Puzo’s novel engages with the paradox of moral power: that ethical behavior becomes secondary when success is the ultimate measure of worth. Through the Corleones, *The Godfather* exposes the blurred boundary between criminality and capitalism. Both depend on hierarchy, secrecy, and strategic violence. From a psychoanalytic standpoint, Don Vito’s authority functions as the Law of the Father. His death initiates Michael’s entry into symbolic adulthood, yet that maturity is

founded on guilt and repression. The transfer of power, though necessary, becomes tragic: Michael inherits authority but loses humanity. This psychological narrative underlies Puzo's moral vision – power isolates, and control destroys intimacy.

Sociologically, the novel captures postwar America's crisis of faith in institutions. The Corleones' self-sufficiency mirrors citizens' disillusionment with government and justice. Puzo suggests that in a corrupt system, private codes of honor replace public morality. The result is an ethical vacuum where justice is personal and morality transactional.

5. Conclusion

Mario Puzo's *The Godfather* transcends its genre by using the Mafia world as an allegory for American society. Its characters embody universal conflicts between morality and ambition, authority and rebellion, love and domination. The novel's enduring power lies in its refusal to resolve these contradictions. Through a synthesis of thematic, psychoanalytic, and sociocultural readings, this study concludes that *The Godfather* articulates a distinctly modern moral vision: success achieved through violence and justified by necessity. Puzo exposes the fragility of ethical boundaries and the psychological costs of authority, suggesting that beneath the American Dream lies a deeper, tragic truth – the corruption of the self in the pursuit of power.

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