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A Marxist study of *Mrityunjaya: The Death Conqueror* by Shivaji Sawant

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Abstract

Every ideology has historical, cultural, national, social and political contexts. These contexts which form their background are important in understanding the inherent social, cultural, political and national structures. Marxist concept of ideology is helpful in understanding the casteism in our country. It can be fruitful to discuss Marxist ideology of Roland Barthes, Louis Althusser, a French Marxist philosopher, and Antonio Gramsci in order to dig deep into the casteism in India, which not only have a long history but it also has been constitutionalised by dividing the citizens in various caste-based categories. Claims are frequently made by almost all the political parties about the impossibilities of abolishment of caste-based sections from the constitution and hence the casteism itself. In this paper we will also find out the concept of Marxist ideology and casteism as present in *Mrityunjaya: The Death Conqueror* by Shivaji Sawant.

Keywords: marxism, Mrityunjaya, Karna, Mythology, Mythological_fiction, Shivaji_Sawant.

Introduction

Roland Barthes noticed his society to be divided into two groups antagonistic to each other: 'bourgeoisie', the upper crust, and 'lower crust people', who aren't the 'bourgeoisie'. Through his concept of 'ideology' Barthes targeted to reveal the signs by which the upper crust exploited the lower one. Althusser identifies two components of the governing body or state which he names as the repressive state apparatus and the ideological state apparatus. The first one includes such forces as the police, army or the court which directly enforce the class domination, and the latter one is less direct but more important in developing an ideology to adhere the state. Certain components of the ideological state apparatus are named above, educational institutions and family being the chief among them. He uses the terms 'base' and 'superstructure' respectively for capitalists and working class. In an essay 'Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses' from the book *On the Reproduction of Capitalism* Louis Althusser stresses on understanding ideology as a practical and materialistic thing. He writes: Ideology does not exist in the 'world of ideas' conceived as a spiritual world, Ideology exists in institutions and the practices specific to them. We are even tempted to say, more precisely: ideology exists in apparatuses and the practices specific to them. (isreview.org)

Parallel to the concept of Marxist ideology, the study of casteism discusses the purposes, working and effects of class distinctions. In India the literature on caste system has a long tradition and it is found with various backgrounds. Rather than political or economic notion, it has religious grounds. Relationship between the pure and impure is the basis of hierarchy on which Indian society is structured. Caste system, which still has its roots, was originated and developed in ancient India. In the beginning phase, hierarchy was based on varnas or skin colors whereby people were divided into four categories namely Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas and Sudras. In the article *The Indian Caste System* written by Madhudvisa Dasa, the author tries to explain the caste system in relation to the views presented in the ancient scriptures. He quotes Vedas, which says that the Varnas or castes are not differentiated on the basis of birth but by mere qualification and work. He believes that caste system in the present age has degenerated. People consider men born in Brahmin families as a Brahmin even though he does not exhibit the qualities of a Brahmin. The author states that in order to

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become a Brahmin adequate training is required and that it is not bestowed automatically by birth as seen in the present generation. High castes of ancient India adopted caste system in order to maintain their superiority over the people belonging to lower ones. Gradually, the caste system evolved into four major groups: Brahmins, who were priests, Kshatriyas, kings and warriors, Vaishyas, who were landowners and merchants and Shudras, artisans and servants. The upper crust ideology attempted to justify the classification of the castes in the above mentioned groups by comparing these to various organs of human body. Proper functioning of these organs was considered to be vital to the body politic.

The same kind of urge can be found in contemporary retellings of mythology in fiction. The story of Karna in *Mrityunjaya: The Death Conqueror* by Shivaji Sawant revolves around one of the important characters of the Mahabharata who fell victim to the casteism. Had his extraordinary skills and talent not been neglected on the name of his low-caste, the story of the Mahabharata would have been different and probably a happy one. Most part of the Karna's part of the narration in *Mrityunjaya* is all about his being treated roughly by a lot of people from the upper crust. Though he always feels like he is one among them and desperately seeks his true identity but he doesn't get a lead until it is too late to accept his reality. There is a lot of animal imagery used in the novel that reflects the inner trauma of the protagonist.

Karna in *Mrityunjaya: the Death Conqueror* narrates his life-story, including the trauma which he underwent because his contemporary society considered him to be a low-caste person. Karna is not alone in receiving harsh treatment from Guru Drona and society on the name of caste. Ashvatthaman, Drona's son informs Karna that Eklavya, the son of Nishad king Hiranyadhanu also shares this lot with him. He had travelled a long distance to reach Drona's place in order to learn war-craft, but he rejects his request on the same grounds that he used against Karna. We find the details of this incident in V. Raghunathan's *Duryodhana*. Confluence of the waters of three rivers sets Karna to think about the evil practice of casteism. Three different colors of the waters indicate the difference on the basis of skin-color.

Seeing that three-braided confluence known as the Triveni, a strange thought occurred to me. How did nature forget to teach man the lesson she taught the three rivers so well? Why does man practice so many contraries of caste and false idea of high and low? Which ocean will these streams mingle in? What else can come out of separation and conflict except destruction? Why not man walk hand-in-hand with man, in a spirit of mutual understanding, uniting all varied streams in one flow? But that of course was wishful thinking, because rivers are rivers, and human beings are human beings. Man is perhaps the only animal in the world whose folly makes him dig his own doom. (*Mrityunjaya* 76)

From the early childhood he realizes that he had a special connection with the god of light, the Sun. Absence of the Sun during daytime makes him restless. His fight with a bull, which charged furiously over the group of playing kids that included Karna as well, makes him realize of his impenetrable skin-armor and powers attached to it, that almost confirms his suspicion that he was not an ordinary charioteer's son. Later, while studying at Guru Drona's he

fights and catches a cheetah. In the fight the claws of cheetah fail even to scratch his skin.

His first experience of the casteist society is when he is rejected to be taught with princes, because he was not one. Gurudeva Drona told his father that training of war skills were exclusive to Kshatriya clan only. Since he was good at target practicing and in physical strength as well, so as a child he is confused what they actually mean by the term 'Kshatriya.' He thinks: "but one question kept buzzing in my head: what was preventing my getting trained alongside the princes? Only a little while ago, Gurudeva had explained that war-skills were exclusive to Kshatriyas. What did 'Kshatriya' mean? Was I a Kshatriya or not? If not, how do I become one?" (*Mrityunjaya* 43) This boy with his innocent thoughts didn't know that not having an identity of a Kshatriya by birth would haunt him like a nightmare for the rest of his life.

The unequal treatment at Gurukul on the name of caste didn't impress him much and he decided to learn the war-skill all by himself with the blessing of his supernatural Guru and inspiration, the Sun-god. He says:

Why should I become a Kshatriya merely to obtain this Guru's favour? Blessed or not blessed, it didn't matter – I will remain a charioteer's son... this Guru's blessing was reserved exclusively for Kshatriyas, his knowledge was for Kshatriyas; he was a Guru for Kshatriyas only. (*Mrityunjaya* 50)

His unpleasant encounter with Guru Drona occurs once again when he visits to beseech him to teach the secret of Brahma-missile. Drone responds:

The Brahma-missile? This secret is for Kshatriyas only... An ass doesn't become a tiger by strutting about in tiger's skin... You may be Kshatriya in Duryodhana's eyes. But in the eyes of the world, you are just the son of a charioteer—a low person, a trivial person. A dog whose beat is a village should not try to be the equal of the king of the jungle... You are the son of a charioteer. To give you the son of a Brahma-missile is like placing a flaming torch in the hands of a monkey. (*Mrityunjaya* 527-28)

Though his search of his identity ends when Krishna reveals to him the truth that he was the son of the Queen mother Kunti and the Sun-God, that he was the first of the Pandavas and the rightful heir to the throne, yet this creates further questions for him. He had promised Duryodhana to stand by him and fulfilling that promise meant to fight against his own brothers. That's why he compares his condition with that of Shri Krishna:

You were born a Kshatriya and reared unfortunately in a cow-shed of Gokula. Yashoda-mata brought you up. I also was born—of a divine origin—and unfortunately I was brought up in a stable in Champanagari. Radha-mata brought me up. Because it was your duty, you had a fist-fight with your maternal uncle Kansa. Because it is my duty, I will have to fight with my own brothers. (*Mrityunjaya* 573-74)

The only problem he had with Pandava brothers, and especially with Arjuna, is that they treated him unequal because of his being a low-caste. After noticing his superhuman powers and capabilities to challenge five Pandava brothers grouped together, Duryodhana befriends him just by treating him as an equal.

In the competition held to mark the last day of training what Bhishma does state his neutral and just position in the matters of caste. He declares Karna winner over Arjuna,

while everyone else were shouting slogans of Arjuna's victory. He draws everybody's attention to the fact that Karna's sound target was more than accurate, that he shuts up the chirping of a bird with his arrow without actually harming the bird. But, right after this incident, the competition arena presents another example of casteism. When Karna challenges Arjuna for a duel to prove that his knowledge of war-craft was superior, Acharya Kripa ascends the platform and asks Karna to reveal his lineage because according to him the rules of war-craft demanded that both the participants in a duel must belong to a same caste group. After it is revealed before the arena that he was a charioteer's son, Bhima takes this casteism a step higher and says:

What's that you said? Charioteer's son? What's he doing among these warriors then? Tell him to do his family business and go brandishing a whip. Leave this place! Massage the horses in the stables and collect their dung! What gives him right to climb the illustrious platform of the Kaurava dynasty? What audacity! (Mrityunjaya 100)

However, Duryodhana trumps the situation by declaring him the king of Anga and winning his friendship and support forever. This doesn't make Duryodhana free from prejudices though. He befriends Karna with a sole purpose of using him as a tool against Pandavas. Plus, he hates Krishna for so many reasons and one among them is his dark skin complexion.

The casteist remarks that Draupadi makes against Karna leaves a deep scar in his mind. Not only she prohibits him to project himself as one of her suitors but she also insults him by saying: "You are not a Kshatriya. I cannot agree to become the wife or daughter-in-law of a charioteer. I am a Kshatriya's daughter, not the daughter of a low born charioteer." (Mrityunjaya 252) Later, Karna accepts that he will never be able to forgive Draupadi for the insult she inflicted upon in front of the court full of kings. It's not that he didn't try to forget the incident, but he simply couldn't.

Another character that suffered this casteism is Krishna. Duryodhana repeatedly talks about him as being a person not fit to sit among royals. Karna had a special liking and respect for Shri Krishna and when Shishupala, Raja of Chedi, calls Krishna 'a lowcaste cowherd' Karna finds it offensive. Shishupala hints Karna's low-caste as well, when in an attempt to escape from Krishna's discus, he avoids to take shelter behind Karna at first considering his caste.

One exceptional thing about Karna is that even after leading a life of injustice, he doesn't support Shakuni and Duryodhana's evil plans against Pandavas. Instead of machinations he supports an open war. He believes, "Anyone who has experienced injustice will never wield the weapon of injustice against another." (Mrityunjaya 340) Even though he had a strong grudge against Draupadi, yet when she is disrespected by Duryodhana and Duhshasana, his inner-self claims it to be wrong.

Injustice! Injustice on an unwell lady in the presence of respected elders and gurus in a packed hall! Mockery! To mock a woman is to mock chastity. Destruction! To destroy a woman's honour is to destroy goodness and idealism. To assault a woman's honour is to attack the essence of humanity itself. Out of this comes conflict—conflict that annihilates all the gentle feelings of mankind. (Mrityunjaya 354)

It is believed that the caste system is a tool used by the

upper caste to get monopoly over power, wealth, knowledge and education by suppressing the lower caste. Indian constitution prohibited this discriminatory custom and abolished the word 'untouchables' in 1950 but in practice a glimpse of it can still be seen. Caste-based reservation in educational institutes and government jobs is told to be a try to decrease this discrimination. In contemporary India, Caste is on decline, especially in the educated middleclass families in urban areas, but it has still not disappeared completely even with the arrival of modern technology and changes in social structure. C. J. Fuller in Caste today (1996) writes: "Educated Indians know that caste exists, but they are unclear and troubled about what it means for them as members of the society that is a part of the modern world. No one can say that it is easy to give a clear and consistent account of the meaning and significance of caste in India today." (153)

After the independence, the caste-based reservations and other such safeguards granted to the backwards sections especially the Scheduled Caste and Tribes have helped in the upliftment of the lower castes. The positive thing is that the number of people which consider caste as an evil to the whole nation is gradually increasing every day. Even in rural areas it is very much possible to come across educated young people who consider caste detrimental to healthy relations between people. In his book Caste in Modern India and Other Essays M. N. Srinivas expresses that ultimately it is people themselves who must understand that caste is a synonym to casteism and certain number of benefits that it offers are bought at a heavy price for the country as a whole. In the book Caste Today Taya Zinkin describes the caste system in India. She says that colour is not the basis of a caste in modern India since a Brahmin will not stop being a Brahmin if he is black skinned nor does an untouchable stop being one if he is fair skinned. She also states that caste does not refer to a class and that every caste has educated and uneducated, well born and ordinary born, rich and poor. Finally, she discusses the beginnings of the breakdown and the change of attitudes among the castes and sub-castes which can be witnessed. She says:

"More recently, loss of belief has been the result, of the spread of education to the rural areas. With education came an arousing of new expectations, which through much of the Indian peninsula produced a new non-Brahmanical leadership, a leadership which was not only non-Brahmin but positively anti-Brahmin." (38)

Similarly, Smitha Narula talks about the inequality and discrimination related to caste system and its impact in India in her article Equal by Law, Unequal by Caste: The 'Untouchable' Condition in Critical Race Perspective. In the Introduction of the article, she states that:

Caste-based oppression in India lives today in an environment seemingly hostile to its presence: a nation-state that has long been labelled the —world's Largest democracy, a progressive and protective constitution; a system of laws designed to proscribe and punish acts of a discrimination on the basis of caste; broad-based programmes of affirmative action that include constitutionally mandated reservations or quotas for Dalits or so-called Untouchables; and an aggressive economic liberalization campaign to fuel India's economic growth. (idsn.org)

It is also strange to see that the reason Karna, in

Mrityunjaya, always feel that he is one among the nobles is that his physical traits do not match with his brother 's and he has some exceptional skills. Thus, in a way, Karna believes that having special physical attributes and being exceptionally skilled are the properties only of royals. Animal and bird imageries are repeatedly used by Karna in his part of the narrative to denote that he was to find out his true identity, which his parents were hiding from him, deliberately or not he couldn't tell. Among many analogies and metaphors used in the novel there are some which uses derogatory remarks for common people. For example, when he visits the forest with his younger brother Shon to collect woods, Shon indicated a stag that got mixed up with the herd of cows. Karna couldn't help relating it to himself and to notice that how glorious that stag looked among the group of cows. In a similar incident, when he notices how the kokila birds that lived on the big banyan tree laid their eggs in crows' nests as the eggs were hard to distinguish, he remarks that: "I am a Kokila. I am a Kokila." (Mrityunjaya 26) Brought up by Adhiratha, the chief charioteer in the palace of Kauravas and his wife Radha, Karna suffers identity crisis as it is pretty hard for him to relate himself with ordinary folks. His extra-ordinary physical features that include impenetrable skin-armor and flesh earrings not only make him look different but also indicate that he belongs to somewhere else. It is striking to notice that Karna believes that he came from a royal lineage on the basis of his bodily features.

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