

## Howard Fast's *Spartacus* : A Marxist Perspective

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### Abstract

The present article entitled 'Howard Fast's *Spartacus* : A Marxist Perspective' aims to critically examine this monumental novel written by Fast from a Marxist Perspective. Howard Fast's monumental novel *Spartacus* can be read for so many reasons, for the enjoyment, for the character portrayal and above all for enactment of the untold chapters of history. But above all, this work should be read for its revolutionary agenda. In this brief paper, an attempt has been made to comprehend the discourse of Howard Fast's much talked about novel *Spartacus* from the Marxist perspective by making bare the dialectical interplay of certain significant metaphors rooted in the existentially important human situations in the text.

**Key words:** Marxism, Slave rebellion, Class struggle, Ideology.

*Spartacus* captures the great slave rebellion held in the ancient Rome in somewhat around 71B.C. The revolutionary struggle for freedom of the slaves which the historians call 'The Servile War' and 'The Gladiator War' has long ago attracted the attention of the revolutionary leaders of the modern proletariat. Karl Marx mentioned in a letter to Fredrick Engels in 1861: "As a relaxation in the evening I have been reading on the Roman Civil Wars. Spartacus is revealed as the most splendid fellow in the whole of ancient history great general (no Garibaldi), noble character, real representative of ancient proletariat" (Marx Dobie, Ann, 83).

In addition to this, many historians found Spartacus' revolt as an important event in its analysis of the *Transition from the Ancient World to the Middle Ages* (as in Voprossy Istorii, July, 1949). Karl Marx saw history as progressive and inevitable. Private ownership, he said, began with slavery, then evolved into feudalism, which was largely replaced by capitalism by the late 18<sup>th</sup> century. At every stage it had negative consequences because it was a flawed system that involved maintaining the power of a few by the repression of many (ibid). The result was ongoing class struggle, such as the one depicted in *Spartacus* between the master Roman imperialism and the slaves. The rebellion of slaves signifies the internal contradictions and fault lines in the totalitarian Roman state. The slaves recognized their subjugation and rose up to seize what was rightfully theirs. It leads to one of the greatest sagas of class struggle in human history. *Spartacus* talks about legend of the Thracian slave gladiator turned a slave leader and the epic revolt being led by him against Roman Empire. There are some uncertainties about his parentage. Some say he was born a Roman slave, others say he had served in Roman legions and then became a brigand before being sold into slavery as a deserter.

After serving in gold mines of Nubia, he was sold again and was sent to Capua to be trained as a gladiator, but in 73 B.C Spartacus and his 70 other slave comrades revolted. The rebels

defeated Roman army under Claudius Glaber and were joined by local shepherds, herdsmen, slaves who swelled their numbers. They further fortified their forces with freed slaves as they won successive victories. Trained to kill for the idle pleasure of his masters, Spartacus sparked the revolt against the cruel, degenerated rule. He led the hopeless men, women and children out of the fields and the slave pens to the greatest rebellion of the ancient world ever saw.

Spartacus hoped to escape across the Alps. He defeated and swept six cohorts (almost one third part) of the Roman army led by the two counsel men, Lucius Gellius and Lentulus Clodians at Picenum. Spartacus managed to move his band as far north as Cisalpine Gaul, where he defeated the governor, but then he retreated south. Led by Spartacus and his heroic band of escaped gladiators, a quickly organised force of 70,000 runaway slaves ( some sources say 90,000, others say, 100,000) held the military might of Rome at bay for almost four years, routing its best legions and establishing control over most of southern Italy and threatening 'the Eternal City' itself. The two sides battled across Italy, but the rebels were eventually vanquished by Crassus' superior numbers. The defeated followers of Spartacus , some six thousand of them , were stung in a line of crucifixes stretching from Rome to Capua , as *tokens of punishments*, a savage reminder to the upcoming generations of slaves of the fate that awaits them if they would challenge Rome ever.

The narrative begins with three young Roman patricians – Caius , his sister Helena and her friend Claudius , who start a journey from Rome to Capua along the Via Appia a few weeks after the final suppression of the slave revolt. The road is lined by tokens of punishment- Slaves crucified in the immediate aftermath of the revolt. During the first day of their journey the party encounter several representative individuals: a minor politician, a prosperous businessman of the equestrian class, an eastern trader and a young officer of the legions: all of whom give their respective perspective about the uprising. On arrival at a palatial country villa where they are to spend the night Caius, Helena and Claudia meet with other guests, both historical and fictional, who either played key roles in the events just finished or who have sufficient perception to analyze the significance of slavery as an institution within the Roman Republic.

The Marxists see all literature as essentially class related. Karl Marx said that all human history is the history of class struggle. There is this constant ongoing struggle between the haves and have not, between the oppressed and oppressive, between the rich and the poor, the proletariat and bourgeoisies. Marxist thinkers read a literary text to analyze how this struggle has been portrayed/ captured in a literary text. Marxist thinkers view history not as a linear progression but as an endless struggle for power among different social classes.

In *Spartacus*, we are given a clear picture of a society that has unequally distributed its goods or even the means to achieve them. The Roman society is clearly divided into the Roman masters and the slaves, the haves and the have not, the ones who own property and therefore the means of production and those who are controlled by them. Spartacus appears as the representative of the 'have not', the marginalised, those who have been treated as less than humans.

According to Marxists, the moving force behind human history is its economic system, for people's lives are determined by their economic circumstances. The economic conditions underlying the society are called material circumstances and the ideological atmosphere they generate is known as the historical situation. It denotes that to understand any social or political context, any event, it is necessary to understand the material and historical circumstances in which they occur (Marx Dobie, Ann 82). Thus, it is imperative to

understand the pitiful living condition of slaves, the kind of life they lived and what made them rebel against it. In 71B.C, from England to America in West, from Syria to Spain in East, it was the era of political dominance of Roman Empire. There were two institutions of governance of Roman political system. One was Senate, the other was Council. Prostitution was legalized and homosexuality was prevalent. Polygamy was being practised and rich women can keep male slaves. In the city of Rome thousands of unemployed spent most of their time drinking and watching sports. Slavery was the darkest chapter of the great Roman civilization. Slaves were an important part of Roman economy. They were considered as personal property of a person. They had neither any civil rights nor there were any laws to protect them. The condition of enslaved women was even worse. The children born to them were also treated as slaves and as they grew up they were being sold again to work in the fields, farms and mines.

In Rome, the slaves used to come from every country devastated by the Roman army. The soldiers of the defeated armies and the common people were forcefully enslaved and being sold in the markets of Rome. Women were mostly bought as personal slaves whereas the males were bought to work in farms and mines. They were being trained as gladiator warriors and then sent to slain each other in the sets for the amusement of callous Romans. Sometimes, they were made to fight with lions, bears and panthers. They were treated as less than humans. Roman philosopher Cicero calls slave 'an instrument who speaks':

They are not human; this we must understand and get rid of the sentimental nonsense the Greeks talk of the equality of all that walks and talks. The slave is the *instrumentum vocale*. Six thousand of these tools line the road; this isn't wasteful, this is necessary!(Fast *Spartcus*37)

The fundamental human values are freedom, love, hope and future. Slavery strip these away until the oppressed have nothing to lose but their lives. The avarice and lust for power of the imperialist coloniser nations robs men so badly that they had no choice except rebel and raise arms against all such atrocities. The black African gladiator became aware of this fact. He refused to kill his fellow slave. Doing so, he refused to become a savage. He attacked the Romans who arrived to watch this ugly sport smitten with flesh and blood. Instead he recognized and assaulted those who were responsible for his plight. He came to realize:

They were both clowns in their shame and bloody degradation. The whole world had been enslaved so that these Romans could sit here and nibble sweets and sip wine in the shady comfort of their box (98).

Although the reaction of the African gladiator remained confined to the individual domain but it helped to provide an organised form to the fury of slaves. His heroic action marked the beginning of the rebellion. As says the concept of *Dialectical Materialism*, "who owns the means of production controls a society's institutions and beliefs". In *Spartcus*, we encounter the falsehood and perverseness behind the 'so called Roman civilization'. Following its imperialistic policy, Rome not only mangled and enslaved the countries of Egyptians, Greeks, Persian, Carthagians, Thracians, Gals, Slavs, Africans, Nubians, Sudanians, Libians, Asirians, Sumerians and Germens but also found a way to justify their inhumanity and avarice by branding people of those nations' savages. The sadism which prevails at the heart of the Roman state gets allegorized through the ruthless comments of the tradesman Selvies, Caius and Claudia regarding the symbolic punishments of the rebellious slaves. Caius calls those crosses as 'the sheer wastage of wood', Claudia feels disturbed at the wastage of 'so much fresh meat'. Whereas, the tradesman Selvius who exports the dry meat of pigs in the

form of *Kebabas*, tells them he has purchased two and a half lakh pound meat of slaves from the army to sell by mixing with the meat of pigs.

The dominant colonizer state not only exploits the economic resources of the colonised nations but also viciously managed to justify their tyrannical ideology by de-humanizing the slaves:

Long ago, Cicero had discovered the profound difference between justice and morality . Justice was the tool of the strong, to be used as the strong desired; morality, like the gods, was the illusion of the weak.(100)

Slavery is a curse where a slave only thinks about bread and how to stay alive, which robs man of his happiness, freedom and hope :

For his kind, there is an agelessness of toil, no youth and no manhood and no growing old, but only the agelessness of toil (55). when men carry a chain, they think of little, of very little, and most of the time it is better not to think of more than when you will eat again, drink again, sleep again. You make men like beasts and they do not think of angels.....(56).

The Roman state had thrown men to the level of savages who strove to survive and nothing else:

It is a desire—not for pleasure, comfort, food, music, laughter, love, warmth, women or wine, not for any of those things—it is a desire to endure, to survive, simply that and no more, to survive (58).

The sub plot of the black slave who attacked the Romans instead of his fellow gladiator is no less tragic. His life before the Roman invasion appears to him like a dream:

The house he had by a riverside and the children his wife bore him and the land he tilled and the fruit of the land, before the soldiers came and with them the slave dealers to harvest that crop of human life so magically transmuted into gold (98).

Fast rightfully uses the word *hell* for the fateful goldmines of Nubia where slaves were forced to work in unthinkable inhuman conditions. “It was that before there was a Christian hell in books and sermons—and perhaps afterwards too—there was a hell on earth that men saw and looked at and knew well indeed. For it is the nature of man that he can only write of the hells he has first created himself” (53). Spartcus and others like him were destined to suffer in that place “One hundred and twenty-two Thracians chained neck to neck, carrying their burning hot chains across the desert all the way from the First Cataract (55)”.

This horrific scene reminds the reader of the terribly menacing scene from Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*(1899 ), where the African slaves suffer under the colonized French. This parallel made us speculate whether this world has really changed in the last two and a half thousand years? But the important thing is that he decided to choose for himself, by rebelling against this tyranny he rejects what is being given to him by life.

In every age, class consciousness has played an important role in the enlightenment of people who fight against the oppression. Education makes us aware of the root cause of our suffering and how it can be fought against. It gets allegorized through dreams of Spartcus where he

sees his grandfather who teaches him to write. With a stick, the old man traces letter after letter in the dirt:

"Read and learn, my child," the old man tells him. "So do we who are slaves carry a weapon with us. Without it, we are like the beasts in the fields. The same god who gave fire to men gave them the power to write down his thoughts, so that they may recall the thoughts of the gods in the golden time of long ago. Then men were close to the gods and talked with them at will, and there were no slaves then. And that time will come again"(62).

From those mines of Nubia, Spartacus reaches the school of gladiators of Capua, where realization of this injustice becomes even more poignant as he watches the slaves killing each other and dying in the arenas just for the amusement of Romans. But with the rebellion of that black slave, Spartacus gets to know what is right and what he should do? That very moment is the moment of enlightenment as he realises : "There comes a time when men must do what they must"(118).

Spartacus rebels against the oppressive political system that robs a human of self respect and intends to turn him into an animal. It forces people to work in inhuman conditions and made them die in the death arenas. Spartacus describes that hellish world created by Romans in his message to the Roman Senate:

"Go back to the Senate (said Spartacus) and tell them what you saw here. Tell them that they sent their cohorts against us, and that we destroyed their cohorts. Tell them that we are slaves—what they call the *instrumentum vocale*. The tool with a voice. Tell them what our voice says. We say that the world is tired of them, tired of your rotten Senate and your rotten Rome. The world is tired of the wealth and splendour that you have squeezed out of our blood and bone. The world is tired of the song of the whip. But we don't want to hear that song any more.....

You turn men into dogs, and send them into the arena to tear themselves to pieces for your pleasure, and as your noble Roman ladies watch us kill each other, they fondle dogs in their laps and feed them precious tidbits. What a foul crew you are and what a filthy mess you have made of life! You have made a mockery of all men dream of, of the work of a man's hands and the sweat of a man's brow... You have made a travesty of human life and robbed it of all its worth. You kill for the sake of killing, and your gentle amusement is to watch blood flow. You put little children into your mines and work them to death in a few months. And you have built your grandeur by being a thief to the whole world. Well, it is finished. Tell your Senate that it is all finished. That is the voice of the tool(162).

Karl Marx wrote in *The Communist Manifesto*, " Let the ruling class tremble at a communist revolution. The proletarians have nothing to lose but their chains. They have a world to win.

Working men of all countries, unite!” Spartacus seems to echo Marx’s this famous statement in his message to the Roman senate when he calls the slaves to unite together:

The whole world will hear the voice of the tool— and to the slaves of the world, we will cry out, Rise up and cast off your chains! We will move through Italy, and wherever we go, the slaves will join us—and then, one day, we will come against your eternal city. It will not be eternal then(162).

Not only this, Spartacus carries a clear image of the post Roman world, a world free of slavery and injustice. It is apparently the Marxist dream of a classless society, “Then, when justice has been done, we will build better cities, clean, beautiful cities without walls— where mankind can live together in peace and in happiness” (ibid).

Spartacus seems to speak for the entire working class. He is well aware of the fact that the producer of all economy and wealth is the proletariat, “what is Rome but the blood and sweat and hurt of slaves? Is there anything we cannot make?”

In his rebellion, we can identify Jean-Paul-Sartre’s existentialism that preaches to have faith in ourselves instead of history, God or any conventional institution. It encourages us to take decision and work for one’s own liberation. According to existential philosophy, there are two kinds of people. There are some people who refuse to acknowledge their freedom and like to follow determined rules made by others. Such people exist unauthentically’. Spartacus and his fellows can be categorized with those who live ‘authentically’, those who do not submit to the hierarchy of values and significance set up in the world for them. It gets clearly reflected in the discourse between Spartacus and the black African, the day it all started:

And then the black man asked him, "Do you believe in the gods?"

"No."

"Do you believe there is another place after we die here?"

"No."

"Then what do you believe in, Spartacus?" the black man asked.

"I believe in you and I believe in me"(90)

They were gladiator slaves. Their destiny was to die for the amusement of their Roman masters. But this death would have neither respect nor valour. Each one of them had accepted this existence as a sordid reality. They had lost all hope. Spartacus revived the dream of freedom , equality and justice. It was Spartacus who brought them back from the deathly hallows to life itself. The day he announced:

"And I am free. Never a moment of freedom for my father or grandfather, but right now I stand here a free man."(117)

"Are you my people?" he asked them, when they were pressed close around him. "I will never be a gladiator again. I will die first. Are you my people?"(118)

Two thousand and five years ago, Spartacus and his comrades fought and died for a classless society, a society free from oppression and injustice. Roman Empire turned into a heap of ruins but people like Spartacus who once stood against exploitation were being remembered. The songs of their bravery were sung. They became an inseparable part of the folklore. They

would work as lighthouse for the people who would ever try to fight against the oppressive establishment. The text ends with a prophecy “And so long as men laboured, and other men took and used the fruit of those who laboured, the name of Spartacus would be remembered, whispered sometimes and shouted loud and clear at other times”(272). Undoubtedly, the slave rebellion should be considered as one of the very initial examples of class struggle in human history.

Going through this remarkable work of world fiction, we come to realize that *Spartacus* does not only sing of a valorous saga of the past but it also carries strong implications for the need of the change that is direly needed in our present world as well.

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