

Voice of the Working Class: A Marxist Reading of Poomani's *Heat*

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Abstract

Literature always reflects the society. The unfair disparity between the affluent and the needy was a major concern of Karl Marx. Marxists theorists, thus, base their opinions majorly based on the working class and class struggles. This study, therefore, aims at a Marxist Reading of the Sahitya Akademi Award winning Tamil Novelist Poomani's Debut Novel, *Heat*. In this novel, we witness exploitation of the poor class by the rich. The novel clearly portrays the divide in the society in the form of the characters. Some characters are from the bourgeoisie class and some characters are from the proletarian class. The conflict in the novel arises due to revengeful act of the Chidambaram, a staunch Marxist by behaviour. Therefore, this paper aims at analysing the novel through a Marxists lens.

Keywords: Oppression, Bourgeoisie, Marxism, working class, class struggle

Introduction

Heat by Poomani is a novel that created ripples. The story is narrated in a non-linear fashion using the flashback technique. In the novel, we find the working class or the proletarians being tormented by the bourgeois. Thus, the novel lends itself to a Marxist Reading. According to Marxist Ideology, everyone deserves parity. The Marxists were against the exploitation of the weak by the affluent class. The novel is infused with various concepts of Marxists. This article tries to analyse how Poomani has used the various concepts of Marxists in the novel. Through this Marxist lens, the novel not only amplifies the voices of the marginalized but also reinforces the need for a broader social change to address the inequities ingrained in a capitalist society.

Summary of the Novel *Heat*

Heat by Poomani is a tale of the oppressed. It is a novel wherein Poomani tries to give voice to the voiceless. The story begins with the Chidambaram, a teenager, killing a big shot in his village, Vadakkuran. The story moves on in a non-linear fashion and we get to know that Vadakkuran had killed Chidambaram's brother. Vadakkuran, an avaricious bourgeois, attempts the grab the land from this family. However, the family refuses to budge. As a result of this, the family lose a son. In order to avenge the death of his brother, Chidambaram kills Vadakkuran. Ayya, Chidambaram's father, goes into hiding along with his only surviving son. The author, then, uses flashback techniques to tell the story of oppression by the affluent class. However, towards the end, Ayya decides to surrender before the court of Law.

Cultural Capital

Pierre Bourdieu, a French Sociologist, proposed the idea Cultural Capital. It is the influence or non-financial assets a person has that can impact his status in the society. This perpetuates inequality in the society. Vadakkuran possesses cultural capital as he belongs to the privileged class. As he has access to cultural capital, the family of Chidambaram is scared

in spite of being the victims. Ayya thinks that using his cultural capital, Vadakkuran would have troubled the family further if he were alive and crippled. Ayya states openly, "He would have bribed the police with all his money to keep on troubling us" (13). Thus, when an individual has cultural capital he becomes powerful in the society. Just as George Orwell in *Animal Farm* writes, "All animals are equal but some animals are more equal".

The same is the case with another influential ginning factory owner. Owing to his status, he got away with a heinous crime of killing an "innocent fellow who was just driving his bullock-cart" (116). There was no action taken against him for this murder. Mama sounds wronged when he says, "That murderer is leading a comfortable life. The police haven't laid a finger on him. They haven't even filed a case" (117).

Chidambaram was the one who committed the act of killing Vadakkuran. Using their influence, the name of Ayya, Chidambaram's father was also included as an accused. This indicates how people with cultural capital can play with law and force in their hands. In *Heat*, Vadakkuran's position as a member of the privileged class grants him cultural capital, which allows him to control and manipulate the situation to his advantage. This reflects Marx's critique of how the wealthy use power to maintain dominance, even in matters of justice.

Ideological State Apparatus and Repressive State Apparatus

Louis Althusser framed two concepts of Ideological State Apparatus and Repressive State Apparatus. Poomani brings in the Althusserian concepts of Ideological and Repressive State Apparatus. The family, although, vengeful does not take strong or powerful steps against Vadakkuran. This is because of the family bond. We find a close family bond among the members of the family. The element of family as Althusser points out is the Ideological State Apparatus.

The elements of Law, Court and the Police that control people by violence are part of the Repressive State Apparatus. These are components that the state uses to control its subjects. While the family represents an Ideological State Apparatus by fostering moral values, the legal system is shown as a tool of the bourgeoisie, helping the wealthy escape justice.

The Repressive State Apparatus, however, is in the hands of the bourgeoisie. When Ayya tells Chidambaram that he would admit the crime before the court of Law, Chidambaram tells, "The real criminals can bribe the officers and come out" (229). It would be a matter of convenience to say that the victims should not take law in their hands and rather believe in law. It is clear through the above response of a fifteen-year-old boy that the affluent can get away with any crime easily. This is akin to what Karl Marx wrote about bureaucracy in the work, *Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right* (1843). Marx says, "The bureaucrat has the world as a mere object of his action".

Bourgeoisie vs Proletarians

A Capitalist society is one in which the people are always subjected to oppression by the capitalists. Marx was against Capitalism as it exploited the working class. In the novel, Vadakkuran is a prototype of a capitalist. He acts like a blood-sucking vampire feeding on the poor. Vadakkuran had his own land. He was greedy and wanted the lands of other people as well. Ayya says, "Greed for property never leaves a man. It won't fade away even if he is cut to pieces" (208). This is the attitude of a capitalist. He had caused all problems because, unlike the rest of the people, this family refused to sell their land to Vadakkuran. Ayya says, "If we

had given our land to Vadakkuran, we wouldn't be facing all this trouble" (207-208). We also get to know that Vadakkuran had snatched lands from others and they had to work as coolies. Ayya sounds painful when he says, "He was angry that our land did not go to him. We had to sign it over to him like the others had done and work as coolies and take to stealing" (208).

The society described in the novel is clearly class-stratified. The proletarians are made to live in a state of fear eventually. In reality, the entire village is dominated by the upper class. In fact, Ayya also wanted to avenge the death of his elder son, but he had to stop himself from doing so. He says:

I am a coward, son. Anyway, how does it matter who did it? He killed my older boy, and now you've cut him down. And he fell writhing in front of the temple entrance like a slaughtered goat. We shouldn't have spared him for so long. He did so many terrible things in the villages around here (12)

Even if the oppressed want to rise against the bourgeoisie, they are scared. This could be seen as an effect of capitalism. Karl Marx writes about the effects of Capitalism thus: "Everyone tries to establish over others an alien power in order to find there the satisfaction of his own egoistic need" (qtd, in Fromm, 1962, P.50). All that Vadakkuran wanted to do was to build his farm. To this end, he acted ruthlessly. Ayya says, "He had built a farm by snatching land from so many people. He wanted to rule over all that land" (208).

Oppression Culminates in Revolution

Vadakkuran, the big wig in the village, wanted to annex the lands of Chidambaram and his family. As the family refused, they had to lose their elder son. As a matter of fact, the entire village is dominated by the upper class but they stop themselves from rising in protest against the bourgeoisie. Ayya wanted to avenge the death of his elder son but he had to stop himself. He says:

I am a coward, son. Anyway, how does it matter who did it? He killed my older boy, and now you've cut him down. And he fell writhing in front of the temple entrance like a slaughtered goat. We shouldn't have spared him for so long. He did so many terrible things in the village around here. (12)

Apart from Vadakkuran, there is a reference to another ginning factory owner as well who killed an innocent boy in public. Mama recalling the incident says, ". . . he killed an innocent fellow who was just driving his bullock cart – it makes my blood boil whenever I think about it" (116). It is quite obvious that Mama too is furious at the behaviour of the bourgeoisie. The same is the case with Ayya, he too says, "We should have cut his meat and fed it to the crows that day. Now he is riding around on his motorcycle like a big, black buffalo, with a cigarette dangling from his lips" (116).

In the conversation that ensues about such capitalists, Ayya says, "We've been fighting this injustice forever, mapillai" (117). This makes it clear that the act of killing by a fifteen-year-old boy is justified by the village on account of the continuous oppression by the landlords. Karl Marx (1964) wrote,

The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles, Freeman and slave, patrician and plebeian, lord and serf,

guild-master and journeyman, in a word oppressor and oppressed, stood in constant opposition to one another, carried on an uninterrupted, now open, now hidden fight, a fight that each time ended either in a revolutionary reconstitution of society at large, or in the common ruin of the contending classes (200)

As Marx points out, the act of murder is a way to give vent to all the pent up emotions of anger and rage. The continuous oppressions by the capitalist in the village has led to this sort of a rebellious act by the young boy.

Conclusion

In *Heat*, Poomani provides a vivid portrayal of the oppressive dynamics between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat, drawing our attention to the inherent inequalities that are deep seated in a capitalist society. Through the struggles of Chidambaram and his family, the novel explores themes of exploitation, revenge, and the relentless grip of power wielded by the affluent. By employing Marxist concepts such as cultural capital, the Ideological State Apparatus, and the Repressive State Apparatus, Poomani critiques the systemic injustices that perpetuate class disparities and affect the working class to a great extent. The tragic yet powerful narrative is a story of resistance, even in the face of overwhelming oppression. Ultimately, *Heat* serves as a poignant reminder of the pervasive struggles of the working class and the transformative power of solidarity in challenging the capitalist order. Through this Marxist reading, we gain a deeper understanding of the ways in which literature can mirror societal inequities, offering both insight and a call for social change.

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