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Exploration of Power Struggle in Chatterjee's Palli Samaj

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ABSTRACT

The article aims to explore the issues of power relations and power struggle in Sarat Chandra Chatterjee's novel, Palli Samaj from a Marxist perspective. The characters, Rama, Ramesh depicted in the novel represent the proletariat living in the Bengal region of India. Although these characters do not mention that they are driven by cultural hegemony, it is noticed that their psychology is embedded with cultural hegemony and class superiority. They are fighting for power. The study applies qualitative approach to research. The paper takes the ideology of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels as the research tool to analyze the power relations in the novel and thereby in the Indian society. It can be noticed that almost all the characters in the novel are fighting for power. Palli Samaj attempts to demonstrate how social power functions to create and continue social domination and how it further creates social prejudices, cultural hierarchy and hegemony. The chief finding is that Indian rural life is dominated by the cruel, corrupt upper-class Zamindari order, landlords to dominate the innocent lower-class peasants. The paper is expected to stand as a reference to all the scholars interested in researching Chatterjee further.

Keywords: Capitalist, Hegemony, Hierarchy, Ideology, Proletariat

INTRODUCTION

The issue of one class ruling over another has been prevalent in Indian society since before its independence (Bandopadhyay, 1986). Rabindranath Tagore, Raja Rao, R. K. Narayan, Mulk Raj Anand, and Sarat Chandra Chatterjee were Indian novelists of the pre-independence era who depicted the influence of capitalist Western society on the East (Mehrotra, 2003). Each contributed through their writings by addressing the inequalities in Indian society and advocating for social reform.

This study aims to examine how Indian capitalists exercised power in the early 20th century and how the proletariat resisted class discrimination. Sarat Chandra Chatterjee's novel *Palli Samaj*, published in 1916, offers insight into gender issues, social taboos, and class struggles of contemporary society. A renowned writer from Bengal, Chatterjee portrayed characters and events based on realistic depictions of Bengali Indian society in his novels and stories (George, 1997; Rahaman, 2012). His depiction of women and serfs resisting economic hierarchy allows researchers to understand his deep perception of contemporary social issues. The sympathetic portrayal of the underprivileged in *Palli Samaj* reflects Chatterjee's profound love and compassion for the deprived (Sarker, 1977). If literature is a mirror of society, *Palli Samaj* stands as one of the best examples.

By the time *Palli Samaj* was published in the early 20th century, the proletariat worldwide had begun revolting against the hegemony of plutocrats who exploited the "have-nots" under feudal systems. The novel, set in rural Bengal, represents the moral standards and social superstitions prevailing in Indian society at the time (Das, 1995).

The protagonist, Rama, was engaged to Ramesh in childhood by their parents, but dogmatic rural politics separated them. She was later married to an old man. After becoming a widow, Rama returned to her father's house, leaving her in-laws' home. However, her childhood emotions and affections subtly reemerge in her silent approval of Ramesh. She is torn between two opposing forces: the regret of being unable to provide unconditional support to Ramesh and the challenge of fulfilling the duties of an unblemished widow, bound by social customs that forbid her from aspiring for more (Sengupta, 1975).

This research raises several questions: How does class consciousness affect Rama and Ramesh in *Palli Samaj*? Why was Rama married to an old man? What motivates Ramesh to expose the zamindari system and its mechanisms of oppression? The novelty of this research lies in exploring how Rama and Ramesh resist the capitalist and patriarchal structures of Indian society in *Palli Samaj*.

This study ultimately aims to examine how the global resistance against power structures inspired the characters of *Palli Samaj* to engage in the struggle for power.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Chatterjee's *Palli Samaj* has been reviewed from multiple perspectives. Many critics have analyzed its characterization, narrative, theme, and purpose. These approaches have led me to reconsider the meaning of the text.

A group of critics has focused on the novel's subject matter and thematic aspects. Sengupta (1975) highlights the politics of rural life, stating:

"*Palli Samaj* is a story of rural poverty and rural politics, of the bad Zamindar's oppression and the good Zamindar's idealism, and into the texture of this story is woven the nostalgic romance of frustrated, youthful love" (p. 55).

The Zamindari class historically exploited peasants. The novel powerfully portrays a caste-ridden village dominated by superstitions and rigid social structures. Mitra (2001) also examines feudalism in the novel, depicting the Zamindars as mean-spirited and manipulative figures. The Zamindars represent the bourgeoisie within Indian and Bengali communities.

Other critics have explored themes of conflict between the colonizer and the colonized, the oppressor and the oppressed, and virtue versus vice in India. Bandopadhyay (1986) views *Palli Samaj* as a tragic portrayal of colonized Bengal. Meanwhile, Sogani (2002) focuses on issues concerning widows, their illicit love, and women's liberty during the Zamindari rule. Das (1995) discusses class conflict and its role in the doomed love story of Rama and Ramesh, set against the backdrop of rural orthodoxy and social restrictions. Reddy (1998) notes Tagore's influence on Chatterjee, particularly in his use of simple, accessible language to address contemporary issues in a modernist setting.

Several critics have examined the novel's characterization. Chatterji (2002) identifies Beni Ghoshal, the Zamindar, as corrupt, greedy, and callous, while the protagonist, Ramesh, strives to reform society. Sarat Chandra Chatterjee portrays the moral dilemma of a widow torn between societal customs and her own aspirations (Chatterji, 2002). These character studies reveal the ethnic and economic discrimination practiced by society. Additionally, Chatterji (2002) notes the novel's coherent plot, which employs foreshadowing and flashback techniques. These narrative elements help convey the author's critique of the biased culture of his time.

Thus, most critics have analyzed the novel's themes from moral and social perspectives, particularly focusing on Rama as an unfortunate widow struggling against rigid customs. However, they have largely overlooked the issue of power struggle, which I seek to address. This gap in research suggests that *Palli Samaj* has not been thoroughly examined from a Marxist perspective. Therefore, this study aims to unveil the multi-faceted exploitation of the poor by the capitalists through a Marxist analysis of *Palli Samaj*.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study develops a theoretical modality based on Marxism, as theorized by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels. The primary data for this research is the novel *Palli Samaj* by Sarat Chandra Chatterjee. This paper employs an interpretative qualitative approach, using the novel itself as the primary source. The main data collection method is textual analysis, in which "interpretation always involves extra-textual knowledge" (Belsey, 2005). Additionally, secondary sources such as literary works and commentaries on *Palli Samaj*, published in journals and websites, are examined to support the working hypothesis. The study is primarily delimited to analyzing the text from the perspectives of Marx and Engels.

Marxism as a Tool

Marxism is a literary movement theorized by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, which perceives society as a continuous history of class struggle (Rockmore, 2018). Neo-Marxism argues that economic exploitation is an external factor, while the Marxist ideology of class struggle is shaped by social consciousness, which is determined by the socio-economic base (Tyson, 2006). Marx and Engels (1994) assert that "all science would be superfluous if the outward appearance and the essence of things directly coincided" (p. 592). Human ideology continuously evolves due to changes in the economic foundation (Marx & Engels, 1994).

Capitalist bourgeois society enforces its ideology upon the proletariat through subtle yet powerful mechanisms. Marx and Engels (1994) believe that one day, people will overthrow the existing system by revolting against the bourgeois class. Many ideological perspectives on human behavior highlight the harmful effects of capitalism on human psychology, particularly in how it shapes our relationship with commodities (Macherey, 1978).

The Marxist approaches discussed above serve as the key theoretical tool to analyze how the poor in *Palli Samaj* endure power struggles imposed by the capitalists.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Researchers of the novel *Palli Samaj* can observe Sarat Chandra Chatterjee raising his voice against the issues of power struggle and class division, which were widely exercised in Indian society in the early 20th century. In the novel, the rich attempt to hegemonize the poor in all aspects of life. The concept of class consciousness pervades the novel, aligning with the Marxist theorists' belief that class consciousness is a form of ideology. According to Marx and Engels (1994), ideology reflects the socio-economic base and the politics behind it.

Beni, an upper-class character in *Palli Samaj*, assumes that Ramesh, another member of his family, will conduct Tarini Uncle's funeral in a grand manner:

“Looks like he’ll perform the ceremony on a grand scale. Are you going to attend the function?” (p. 1).

This demonstrates the bourgeois belief that aristocratic funerals should be grand, almost like ceremonial events. They hold the opinion that if someone from the higher class dies, their funeral must reflect their status. By organizing grand events, they aim to distinguish themselves from the poor. Thus, class consciousness governs the mentality of Indian society. Capitalists regard the working class as subhuman (Kelly, 2020) and consistently underestimate the poor.

Marxist literary theorists consider literary texts as mirrors of society, reflecting its dialectical totality. This totality seeks to understand the conflict between laborers and capitalists (Lukács, 1971; Macherey, 1978). *Palli Samaj* portrays characters and conflicts rooted in real society. Characters like Rama, who is forced into marriage with an older man due to poverty, or Ramesh, who dares to fight capitalist domination, are reflective of actual individuals in Indian villages. The novel’s characters feel like real people rather than fictional figures. It embodies Marxist principles by mirroring societal struggles.

In capitalist societies, the rich plot to appropriate the property of the poor (Kelly, 2020; Marx, 1983). Rama apprehends this scheme when Ramesh tells Beni:

“Tarini Ghoshal’s son entered our house to invite us! I’ve forgotten nothing, Benimadhab. Tarini had wanted to marry this son of his to my Rama. My Jatini hadn’t then been born. Tarini must’ve thought that thereby he’d be able to grab the entire property of Jadu Mukharji.” (p. 2)

Capitalists like Tarini conspire to marry innocent women like Rama to seize their property. The proletariat, however, continues to resist such exploitation (Marx, 1983). Ramesh tells Beni:

“But when he couldn’t succeed, he engaged this fellow Bhairab Acharjya to employ some black magic for bringing bad luck to my Rama.” (p. 2).

This reinforces that the novel captures reality, not mere imagination. The characters speak and act in ways that reflect genuine societal conditions.

In capitalist societies, discrimination is based on material possessions, status, and class (Cowling, 1982). When Beni’s aunt speaks to him, he perceives her superiority and his own inferiority, realizing that economic sufficiency creates class divisions:

“Beni’s smile faded at the aunt’s sharp tone. He could not think of any satisfactory answer to this accusation. But he did not have to think long.” (p. 8).

The rich suppress the voices of the poor, but Rama defies bourgeois norms. The narrator states:

“Suddenly Rama, who had been silent all this while, spoke to her aunt from inside the room. After all, aunt, it’s best that you have spoken yourself. Nobody else could’ve spoken so venomously like you.” (p. 8).

Rama challenges the Indian belief that widows should remain silent in male-dominated families (Sogani, 2002). She represents the lower class, resisting power structures imposed by the plutocrats.

Chatterjee references Brahmin history to illustrate their privileged status. By the late 19th century, village life was dominated by superstitions, caste prejudices, and economic power held by landlords, moneylenders, and, to a lesser extent, Brahmins (Szczepanski, 2020). The ideology of class superiority existed long before India’s independence. The narrator highlights this irony:

“About a hundred years ago, to this part of Bengal from Vikrampur, along with his namesake, Balaram Ghoshal settled here. Besides being a high-class Brahmin, Mukharji was also a clever man.” (p. 9).

True Marxists critique societies where the rich exploit the poor due to economic disparities. Capitalists fail to understand the struggles of the poor because they prioritize property over humanity (Macherey, 1978; Rockmore, 2018). Chatterjee illustrates how Brahmins, originally not wealthy, accumulated riches by exploiting others.

Power is always exercised by the dominant class. It should be understood as an action, not an attribute. Proper use of power serves noble causes, while misuse of power leads to exploitation (Palermo, 2019). Balaram Ghoshal exemplifies a capitalist, accumulating wealth through marriage, service under the Burdwan Raj, and other means:

“He acquired this property through his marriage and service under the Burdwan Raj, and also by other means.” (p. 9).

Marxist critics oppose power conflicts generated by the culture industry, which perpetuates the belief that all power relationships are interactive and reciprocal (Adorno & Horkheimer, 2019). However, power possession remains reciprocal—Marx (1983) argued that today’s bourgeoisie may become tomorrow’s proletariat and vice versa. This is evident in Ghoshal’s case:

“He married in this part of the country, but he was able to achieve nothing except beget children, and so passed his days in poverty and misery.” (p. 9).

Capitalists’ indifference and inhumanity often lead to their downfall.

In capitalist societies, monetary value dictates all relationships (Cowling, 1982; Marx & Engels, 1994). The characters in *Palli Samaj* are driven by wealth, property, and status. They believe money determines happiness, as reflected in the novel:

“But on the next day, a strange story was heard. It transpired that, before his death, Balaram Mukharji had divided his entire property equally between his own son and the sons of his friend. Since then, the two families—the Mukharjis and the Ghoshals—had been enjoying the Kuanpur estate. They prided themselves as landowners, and the villagers also did not question their claim.” (p. 9).

Materialistic societies tend to be corrupt, with the upper class discriminating against the lower class (Palermo, 2019). They respect and provide privileges to rulers while ignoring the working class. The novel highlights this corruption:

“As Ramesh entered his house, a gentleman, who was sitting there, hastily got up and, pushing his hookah to one side, did obeisance to Ramesh at his feet.” (pp. 43–44).

Marxist critics argue that disasters disproportionately affect the poor, as the wealthy remain indifferent to their struggles (Macherey, 1978). In *Palli Samaj*, Ramesh seeks to help the poor, but the Ghoshals and Mukharjis remain unmoved. Their lack of empathy is evident:

“I also don't understand why we should suffer this loss, retorted Beni.” (p. 57).

Ultimately, *Palli Samaj* critiques capitalist exploitation and advocates equality. The title itself reflects class struggle, as *Palli* refers to laborers from the Sudra caste, and *Samaj* signifies society. It encapsulates the oppression of the proletariat by landlords and industrialists, as well as their resistance.

CONCLUSION

Thus, the chief finding of this research is that all people in *Palli Samaj* engage in class and power struggles in one way or another. The common forms of power exercised by the bourgeoisie include religious power, kingly power, the power of science and technology, economic power, and more. However, the fundamental goal of those who wield power is to dominate the people.

The novel *Palli Samaj* exposes social corruption caused by materialism in multiple ways. It reveals discrimination, where the upper class segregates the lower class. Members of society are accustomed to showing respect and providing privileges to the ruling class or the heads of institutions, yet they disregard the working class. This highlights the corruption generated by power and money. The rich repress the poor, directly or indirectly, sometimes using religion as a tool of domination. Through the repressive ideology of capitalism, the poor are conditioned to accept their suffering in silence. They are told that God watches over everyone and that those who do good will be rewarded after death. In this way, capitalists exploit religion to oppress the working class.

Social hierarchy is evident throughout the novel. The elite fail to understand the struggles of the poor. This is illustrated through Ramesh, a member of the so-

called elite society, whose heartless behavior reflects his inability to comprehend the boy's suffering or why he is forced to beg. This demonstrates how capitalism has devastated the lower class. The upper class believes they can treat the poor however they please, viewing them as objects rather than human beings.

Ultimately, *Palli Samaj* conveys the idea of equality among all people. Rama and Ramesh represent the working class, fighting against corruption in capitalist societies. They recognize the oppression imposed by the elite. Ironically, political realities are determined by economic status.

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