

**CLASS AND CULTURE ARE SYNONYMS – A KALEIDOSCOPIC VIEW OF INDIAN
CULTURE IN *KATHA PRIZE STORIES* THROUGH MARXIST READING**

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ABSTRACT:

Culture is cultivated and produced. Cultural production is determined by the material condition of the people. As culture is the outcome of the means of production, people who hold the material possessions become the dominant producers of it, which paves the way for the social stratification of the upper class and the lower class further producing the high and low culture. Marxism as part of cultural study decodes the formation of class systems and cultural productions. *Katha Prize Stories* is a critique of Indian Culture and its diversity. It includes stories from different walks of life across India. Thus, the study aims at that the class stratifications and cultural productions are similar in characters since both articulate the dominant culture and class system which are registered in select *Katha Prize Stories*. The article also justifies that literary texts particularly *Katha Stories* become the authenticity of the historical events incorporating the class struggle and the social injustice through the lens of the Marxist cultural materialist view.

Key Words: Marxism, Cultural Materialism, Social Stratification, Cultural Production

INTRODUCTION:

Culture is cultivated and socialised, therefore people who hold the means of production could produce dominant culture and who do not own the means of production are seized from producing culture and cultural productions. They are expected to embrace the dominant culture in a given society. The people in the lower segment of society too have their own cultural identity which is not as dominant as the culture of the upper class. The rift between two cultural practices is known as high culture and low culture. The majority of the people irrespective of caste and class happened to embrace the high culture and its practices, which has become a social norm, they become the victims of the high culture. This practice is known as High culture. Material conditions like owning land, and lead to producing wealth. Wealth helps people to produce culture. So the lifestyle of people is governed by the means of production.

CRITIQUE OF MASS CULTURE:

High culture and low culture

Culture and cultural practices are always monolithic practices being produced by the dominant culture and enforcing the same on the people of low culture. Culture is cultivated and socialised. Therefore the dominant culture or high culture is produced by the hands of the socially, and economically dominant sect of a society, thus, it becomes mass culture. The privilege of producing and cultivating a culture by the group of people in a society is possible when they uphold power and the ability to inspire others through their ideology; they achieve this status quo because of the material condition and reality. An enormous amount of wealth comprising money and land allows the possessor to exercise their power over others affecting their life since they are forced to follow the high culture and its cultural artefacts like language, entertainment, clothing, lifestyle, food habits, and so on. People, who do not own wealth or money, hardly produce anything except give their labour to the means of production for their masters. In the Story “Funeral Feast” People who do not own the means of production are not able to be the producers. Land leads to cultivation and cultivation leads to customisation of habits like food habits, food culture, learning habits, change in thinking patterns, money making, producing new materials, and so on. Therefore, the means of

production determines the lifestyle of a man. Since people of the village especially poor farmers and labourers are not able to celebrate festivals owing to their financial circumstances they seem to not do any of the cultural activities “No work, no festivals even; how was one to spend time?” (40). People cultivate festivals and other celebrations when they own resources. The author deliberately says that in the festival of the poor people hardly any involvement of the other sect. The festival is one of the cultural artefacts that normally gives credit to the high culture but at the same time, there is also a festival of low culture as seen in the story. PeddaAppaiya is dead and “the sons were trying to arrange for the burial. The list of essential items was long: vermilion, turmeric powder, incense sticks, saffron, bamboo poles and rope to make the ‘last-stretcher.’ One can get along in life without many things but it is not so in death; all these things had to be got, and immediately.” (KPS vol.1, 46) The act of burial itself is part of the culture. The way the deceased is honoured and given a good farewell is part of one’s cultural practices. According to the ability of the people, it differs. Similarly, according to the social sect, it differs; the social sect includes different castes and hierarchy systems in the society. The materials to buy for the funeral of PeddaAppaiya are conditioned to one’s culture. They can bury the person without doing rituals and procuring necessary materials to be bought for the rituals but the cultural practices of one are instilled or cultivated by the high culture, forcing them to buy the needed one, though they are not in a position to afford them. It is because of the high culture influences on the low culture. It is evident in the story that after the burial the sons are “On their way home they stopped to consult the Brahmin in the Aanjaneyaswami temple. The tenth day happened to fall on an Astami. It was decided that the final ceremony and dibber would be held on the eleventh day.” (48) The ritual practices in the death of the old man and even in the post-ritual practices are part of high cultural practices mooted by the people who belong to the upper class in the hierarchy system. The sons of the deceased approach Brahmin to appease the departed soul. It is a dominant ideology or high cultural practice imposed upon the poor people to call for priests. To appease the departed soul to rest in peace, people need to do rituals and pujas by the Brahmin who belong to the socially upper-class family. He is the only person entitled to do the rituals, which are accepted and followed across the village and in the neighbourhood. Failing to do the rituals as part of funeral and post-funeral practices may lead to disrespecting the soul, or the soul may not attain eternal rest is the belief of all sects persuaded by the dominant class people. In the story, the Brahmin’s upper class and priestly identity, project his strong presence in the neighbourhood through his dominant ideology. Religion, which is found in superstructure according to Marxist analysis of class and society has a power relation with the followers. The doctrines of religion have been preached by the priest and the same is expected to be followed by the followers. Brahmin takes control of the people and establishes that he is the most eligible person to do rituals other than anybody else. His approach is believed to be the typical high culture. The sons of the deceased follow whatever the Brahmin says and “The Brahmin reeled off the mantras, punctuating the recitation by asking for various daanas of gold, new clothes, cows and innumerable other items – gifts from those who had no proper cloth to cover their bodies” (p. 50). Therefore, culture is determined by the means of production which produces a high culture and low culture.

Similarly, in the story “The Room by the Tubewell” there is a representation of high culture and low culture. The people in the “multi-ethnic slum” represent the low culture. As said earlier, the material conditions of the people, give space for them to involve in cultural artefacts. These poor people though they differ in terms of different ethnic identity, share a common culture that is low. There are also mass cultural influences in the story for example when there is a description of Shib Shankar “no property and no domestic help. He had neither a kitchen nor a toilet, no car, no job”(95) which are all expectations of the upper class, inspire the poor people to have the same. These cultural artefacts represent the mass culture, which has a great influence on the people of the low culture.

The characters, the sons of GundappaMahadi in the story “The Curse” expose that they embrace the high culture. They own “cattle, tractors, workers, motors, scooters... the site is beyond description” (124). All the above-mentioned assets are not owned by other characters in the story. All these

upgraded lifestyles of owning uncommon properties elucidate that they embrace a high culture. So material ownership advances them to be involved in cultural production. They also own a foreign breed dog, which is used to attack Mallanna in the story. Mallanna is advised by Bairangi not to go to KunddappaMahadi because the Kunddappa family lives a confined life, having boundaries among them. They hardly have a guest in the house. They are filthy rich but lack a good heart to help others. People in Thondamandalm have an opinion on the Mahadi family that they are a big shot in the neighbourhood and they are dominant too. None wishes to trespass into their house. This view of considering them distinctive from others is created by the family through their dominant presence in society. Since other people do not have the same lifestyle, indirectly pushes other subservient categories to have similar lifestyles. "It is a veritable Vaikuntham (Heaven), the abode of Lord Vishnu" (124). This quote supports the view of the economically lower class on Mahadi, which is a heavenly place. Therefore, KunddappaMahadi lives a prosperous life and claims their supremacy of high culture persuading the other classes to long for such life as a real one. When religion and its practices become a monolithic culture among its followers, its presence in the form of cultural practices has become a mass culture. The story "Nombu" has such a thing in its content. The portrayal of the Muslim community and their religious practices are very common among the followers. Despite the common practices among the believers, the socio-economic factor determines their differences. Fast is one of the primary practices among Muslims during the holy month of Ramadan. The kind of food they consume to begin the fast and break the fast differs between the rich and the poor. The character Addu, the young boy from a poor family, envisages having a portion of good food to consume but gets only poor thick akkirotis from his mother. Kashim, on the other hand, hails from a well-to-do family, able to get rich food to consume and the same has been absolved by the family members, when the elderly people break the fasting. However, the kind of food to consume to break the fast is wished to be common among all inviting the sons-in-law and other relatives. Unfortunately, it is not common due to the economic condition of the family. Addu's family is in such a condition, wishing to have good food to break the fasting but could not. There exists a contrast between the high culture of Kashim's and the low culture of Addu's. The Religious identity propagates mass culture but unfortunately, the financial circumstances do not allow people to follow the same mass culture though it is there in terms of belief but not in terms of the quality of life they live. Thus, there is a high culture and a low culture presented in the story.

Touring has become one of the important pastimes of people. Exploration is imagined to be the stress buster. In post-independent India, sports were also common among the literate people. People engaged themselves in various sports activities. One such sport is hunting. Hunting was common among the rich in India at the time of post-independent India. In the story, Laxminarayan along with Sricharan, visited the hilly region. They have visited Jumpabai village too. They have toured the place for two things. One is for sightseeing and the other one for hunting. They took down a tiger as they moved around the forest. This incident inspired many in the neighbourhood and has become a mass culture of others. The role of TiladaanamuSubbiah in the story "Tiladaanamu" is termed to be of low by nature. As described earlier, he receives tiladaanamu from people as it is comparable to alms. Tiladaanam is given to a priest who performs pujas to appease the malefic planet, Satan. One who performs this pooja is noticeably low from other priests. The other purohiths and priests who have become commercial in their duty do pujas for 'subhakariyam' (auspicious work). So, the nature of work determines one's identity. Thus, TiladaanamuSubbaiah's nature of work determines his identity and considers as a low culture. However, always a dichotomy exists between the rich and poor and eventually forms the high culture of the rich and the low culture of the poor. Therefore, there is a subculture produced.

HISTORICITY OF TEXTS AND CULTURAL FORMS :

Cultural materialists stress the importance of understanding texts and cultural forms within their historical context. This involves examining how texts interact with and respond to the material

conditions of their time, including economic relations, class structures, and political conflicts. Within the dominant culture of a society. “The changes in historiography are not necessarily a mere process of evolution, but are shaped by continuous intellectual struggles, rooted in ideological influences, political interests and material concerns” (Panikkar)

HISTORICITY OF TEXTS :

Text is always a representation and speaks for a certain group. Here, language plays a crucial role in bringing or to construct the identity. Cultural materialists stress the importance of understanding the texts and cultural production within its historical context. So that the text could be deciphered appropriately to decode the meaning of it, which is historically connected. In this connection, the author's advocacy in producing the text is very crucial. It involves how the literary texts interact with and how the material condition of the time like economic status, class structure, and power relations exist in the given society. In the story “The Funeral Fest”, the language of the poor people is “Hard times, when two rupees will barely get you two seers of ragi. When it is difficult to get a seer of jonnalu for two rupees and a half. And dry chilies are selling at sixty rupees a kilo” (2-3) indicate their identity as they are. What they speak is how they live. The text incorporates other representations too; the life of drumbeaters: soon after the old man dies, everyone is preparing for the funeral and they call the drumbeaters. In India, it is a tradition to beat drums when a person passes away. If it is not done, it might be seen as not giving enough respect to the dead. So, whether one is rich or poor, it has to be done. It speaks of their identity. The drumbeaters, who are socially low, are called for this business. Their business of beating drums gives them an identity and their language too does the same. “The drumbeaters were sent for. They demanded forty rupees. The sons were prepared for only twenty. “All right”, said the beaters finally, “pay thirty and we will beat the drums!”(9). Their stand in getting a reasonable amount of money for their work is part of their Identity. The story does not fail to nail another sect of the society; the gravediggers. “The next bit of work was diggers asked for fifty rupees” (9). There are strong representations of all sects of people from the village beginning with poor farmers, moneylenders, priests, drumbeaters, gravediggers, and women folk. There are several cases where women construct their identities in the story. The wife of Pedda-Appaiya, the wife of her elder son, and others, register their contempt, when men fail to do their regular course or are unaware of the family situation in the context of the famine. It speaks of the lifestyle of the villager, which gives them their identity. The story provides all the cues to understand every aspect in an in-depth manner. All these create the identity of the villagers. The stories taken for research are dynamic, representing different socio-linguistic cultural backgrounds. Owing to the typicality of stories, there are things abundantly available to speak about the different cultural backgrounds where characters grow and meet conflicts within and among other characters.

Culture is also organic and process. It is moved on and therefore it is mutable. The conception of culture, therefore, is contingent upon the constraints set by society, but at the same time, its meaning undergoes continuous revision and refinement according to the changes in the configurations in society. In other words, culture is not static but dynamic in its character and practice. The variety of meanings it acquires over some time is partly a result of its dynamic character. (Panikkar) The existing phenomenon in society controls the habits, lifestyle, language that is spoken, attitude, and so on. Therefore, culture changes its characters due to changes in society. This change is the advent of any revolution and subversive approach by the submissive group. Usually, the dominant or upper-class people enforce their values on the lower-class people. Since there is a possibility of opposition from the oppressed people therefore change in culture is also possible. In this stance, one has to understand the cultural identities of the society in the stories. Since culture is mutable as stated above the difference among the villagers in terms of cultural identity occurs not only through the material possession of the dominant class but also due to some catastrophic events. Catastrophic events include revolution breakouts, wars, natural disasters, etc. The Farmers in the story “Funeral Feast” suffer famine. Due to that, they become prey at the hands of poverty. This catastrophe has brought

down heavily the lives of farmers and labourers. They do not have good food to consume, good clothes to wear, do not have qualitative time to spend with the family members “Men had no work. The cooking pot had no grain...lighting a bidi, no festivals even; how was one to spend time? (*KPS* vol.1 p.40) The famine leads the farmers’ lives to the most disadvantaged ones. Poverty controls the lifestyle of the people. The penniless life of people does not allow one to look after one’s father. Pedda-Appaiya who is on the deathbed aspires to eat mutton and drink toddy as a last wish. His eldest son, Marrippa is not able to get him medicine and not able to fulfil his father’s last wish. As a son, one has a bound duty to look after one’s father who is at his deathbed is looked up to as part of cultural practice. In the case of the eldest son who could not afford his father a medication due to poverty suppressed the cultural practices and eventually marked a change in the culture. Famine does not allow the sons to be merciful to their father which is usually shown to a father. Sons are reminded of their own family to be looked after by being handicapped not showing deep concern towards their father. This act, therefore shows that their cultural identity is changed from being good to heartless. “Shame was a luxury for women whose tom blouses exposed their armpits and breasts. Women were ready to sleep with anybody for a bundle of grass. How could anyone in such a village even think of a full meal?” (40) Poverty at the outbreak of famine changes even the so-called morality of the people in the story. Chastity, which is highly valued, more than life by the Indians, has become insignificant. Maintaining moral values is mooted by the cultural values that have been changed due to poverty. In this stance, culture is mutable. The story “The Room by Tuberwell” registers the diversified culture of Calcutta and its suburban places, especially the multi-ethnic slum. This short story also incorporates, how a different form of culture is formed in a place. The text represents the life of different people and how their place, shapes their habitual actions. For example, the people in slums do different jobs like hawking products, working as a proofreader like Shib Shankar, soothsaying like the astrologer, and other hard work. They all live in one place and develop their cultural identity. To understand the story and its characters in a detailed way, one has to be aware of the concept of slum and its inception. The description of the word slum goes like this:

A slum is an area characterized by poor buildings in the physical state of disrepair, the degraded environment in unsanitary conditions, and absence of basic and essential facilities such as electricity, potable water, drainage system, schools, health facilities, and recreational grounds. Slums can be described as substandard housing environments. Slum conditions result from the combined effects of natural aging of buildings, lack of maintenance and neglect, wrong use of the buildings, poor sanitation in the disposal of sewage and solid waste, wrong development of land, and increasing deterioration of the natural landscape (Olotuah). Thus, the concept of slum is a reminder of societal failures and injustices. It represents a manifestation of poverty, inequality, and the failure of urbanization. The author has exposed the economic condition, power structure and cultural production of the people in a story. Major characters in the story live in a pathetic condition because of the poor living conditions, because they are forced to choose to live in the slum. The Physical ambient determines the behaviour pattern of the people and eventually helps to produce their culture. These people lack basic amenities like good food, water, shelter, health facilities and so on. The fast urbanisation and wrong plan leads to the formation of the slum. Most of them are migrated to work for the urban development project or displaced due to poverty. The character Shib Shankar “had run away from home, drawn by the charms of Calcutta.” (*KPS* vol.1 95) It is evident that under the false impression, the protagonist migrated from the village to the city aiming for a better living but unfortunately, he is not able to be a successful man. The poor condition does not allow him to think out of the box and live a below-average lifestyle. His ambient does not even allow him to help others and become a self-centred person. Urbanisation could also be viewed as a catastrophe for the poor people because the urban development project is believed to help all sects to grow a greater height but in reality, it has become partial in helping the dominant group. Therefore, the government does injustice to them by not considering these poor people in satisfying their basic needs “There is a single tubewell to provide water for the entire slum population.”(95) There is a power structure that

divides people based on their identity, which is shaped by the slum. Since culture is mutable, the culture of the people in the slum is also mutable due to their economic factors. India is a country with a diversified cultural background. Diversity is the uniqueness of Indian identity. It is called mosaic culture. However, Indian diversified culture is much proclaimed as the strength of the nation at the same time, the same strength is much criticised for its antagonistic approach. Diversity in Indian society leads to social stratification, which causes unethical practices in society. Religion and its practices are the main cause of social stratification. In India, people are divided based on caste. Religious doctrines pave the way for this division among the people. The same religious doctrines guarantee people to own the economic basic, which causes the class distinction as well. The dominant castes happened to own the means of production and labour. The Social stratification of a particular region is influenced by the cultural norms and values followed in a region, which are tailored by the castes and class system in India. This social stratification is a key determinant in dividing the physical presence of the place in a society, whether it is a village or a town. For example, the town called Thondamandalam in the story "The Curse" is constructed based on caste and class division among the people. It is evident from the conversation between Mallanna and Biarangi in which Mallanna the tribal man, whose livelihood is dependent on alms and soothsaying, describes the town "There's an uptown and there is a downtown, Swami. The downtown is full of narrow lanes and small houses, like the rat holes found in the fields. . . The middle section of the town consists of the bazaar...In the south, the Kapus (Kapus who are Shudra by caste and are an agricultural community) have their quarters. They are middle-class people. Finally, in the north of the town, there is a large two-story bungalow with a wall on all four sides. It is called GundappaMahadi" (124). Therefore, the caste system and class system are the main cause of the cultural formation of individual groups. In the same story, there are characters like Mallanna, Bairangi, the priest, Sugali tribal people, beggars, and KunddappaMahathi sons, who have their respective cultural identities. Their cultural identity is determined by both the castes and class system which are administered by the material conditions of the person. The life of Kandhas in the story "Shikar" changed due to the intervention of the government and other rich people in their place. As they see the arrival of the settlers getting settled in their territory, they see a remarkable change in their behaviours. Once stood as indomitable people doing independent farming and associated with nature, has now faded away from them. They now become subordinates and bonded labourers. Some of them who resisted the change became revolutionaries. All such changes are made due to their economic conditions and being ignorant of conditions.

CHARACTERS AS CLASS REPRESENTATIVES :

Goldthorpe's Neo-Weberian Theory focuses on class as a multidimensional concept, incorporating aspects of occupation, education, and income in defining class positions.

"The Funeral Feast" portrays different social classes and their roles and relationships in the village. The moneylenders are portrayed as the village's most powerful and wealthy group. They control the economic and social life of the village, lending money to the farmers at high interest rates and taking their land when they cannot repay the loans. They are also shown to be corrupt and exploitative, using their power to extract wealth from the poor. For example, it is mentioned that the moneylenders "lent money to the farmers at high interest rates and then took their land when they couldn't pay back the loans." (41) There is a group, which belongs to the low class in the village are the Farmers who are the backbone of the village's economy, but they are also the most vulnerable. They are shown to struggle to make ends meet, with many unable to repay their loans to the moneylenders. They are also portrayed as being at the mercy of the weather, with the drought causing their crops to fail. For example, it is mentioned that "Three years since the rains had come. Three years since the crops had grown." (39) The Labourers: The labourers are shown to be the most marginalized group in the village. They are forced to work for low wages and are often exploited by the moneylenders and the farmers. They are also shown to be vulnerable to disease and illness, with

many of them dying from starvation and other ailments. For example, it is mentioned that "Even the wetlands around the pond had ceased to offer a livelihood to the labourers." (40) The Brahmin is the highest caste in the village and is shown to be the most privileged group. They are the only ones who can perform the last rites and are therefore seen as having a special role in the village. However, they are also shown to be arrogant and condescending towards the other villagers. For example, it is mentioned, "He was the one who looked down on the other villagers and treated them as inferior." Overall, "The Funeral Feast" portrays a society that is deeply divided along class lines. The moneylenders and the Brahmin are shown to be the most privileged groups, while the farmers and the labourers are the most vulnerable. The story highlights how economic and social factors intersect to create social inequality, and it underscores the importance. In the story "The Room by the Tuberwell" the characters are from various socio-cultural and economic backgrounds. They do different jobs and share either common cultural practices or different ones, due to their social hierarchal position in a society. For example, the character Shib Shankar is a learned Brahmin man but leads a poverty life. Though he is in poverty and lives in a rented tiny room in the slum, never "consciously done any good to others. Has carefully are not his business." (96) it exemplifies that he propagates his dominant role which he has inherited through his upper caste title. Other characters like Hanuman Prasad and Ruli and minor characters like Panchanan, the riskshawala, and Chamu, "the acknowledged leader of the para" represented the lower class in the society. Their life is always in a devastating condition. Whereas other characters like Dr.Choksi and the Pandit, who play a dominant role, represent the upper class in the story, and have different cultural practices and roles in the society. Their relationship with other characters is conflict-oriented. All of them engaged in different jobs, which guaranteed them either a meagre income or a good income. The differences in income, status, power, and economic disparity, lead to social stratification.

CONCLUSION :

The *Katha Prize Stories* anthology serves as a valuable lens through which we can observe the intersections of class and culture in Indian society. By portraying characters from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds, these stories illustrate how cultural production is inherently tied to material conditions and class structures. The dominance of "high culture," upheld by those who control wealth and resources, imposes a hierarchical framework on society that marginalizes the cultural expressions of the lower classes. Through a Marxist cultural materialist perspective, we see that these stories do not merely recount personal experiences; they reflect historical and social realities, revealing the struggles and injustices faced by those excluded from cultural dominance. This study reaffirms that literature, particularly culturally diverse works like *Katha Stories*, plays a crucial role in authenticating historical class struggles and social inequalities. By capturing the nuances of everyday lives shaped by class, these narratives critique the social order, expose the hegemony of dominant culture, and give voice to the underrepresented. The *Katha Prize Stories* thus become not just literary texts but authentic records of the ongoing cultural and class dynamics in Indian society. In doing so, they reinforce the idea that cultural production is inseparable from the power structures that govern it.

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