

## Reading through the Marxian Lens: A Study of Social Stratification in Kiera Cass's *The Selection*

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### Abstract

Kiera Cass, an American writer of young adult fiction, depicts the conflict between the ruling class and their subordinates in her novel *The Selection*. She is best known for her *Selection* series. The first book in *The Selection* trilogy, *The Selection*, was published in 2012. The novel describes various caste differentiation based on professions and status in the society. Glancing through the Marxian viewpoint, the novel portrays the ruling class's domination in the society where the subordinates have to follow the rule of the former blindly. The study aims to focus on caste differentiation and hegemonic rule, which oppresses its subordinates through the concept of ideology.

**Keywords:** Caste Struggle; Hegemony; Ideology; Oppression; Stratification.

"The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggle" (Marx and Engels 79). As pointed out by Karl Marx, no society escapes the clutches of class struggles, and it is the intricacies involved in such struggles that shape and mould each community. In opposing and defending them, the public develops their affinities to and against class positions. Hence, class has become an unavoidable aspect as it defines a society. Besides, it has also become a widely contested and debated topic for ages.

Critics and thinkers have put forward different theories, most of whom attempt to analyse the class's divisible nature. Marxist theoreticians seek to probe deep into the reasons behind the potential of class to divide people easily. According to Gramsci, "the people themselves are not a homogeneous cultural collectivity but present numerous and variously com-

bined cultural stratifications which, in their pure form, cannot always be identified within specific historical popular collectivities" (195). Marxian concepts have reached various forms of development in different periods. Many philosophers had interpreted Marxian ideas in a refined way.

Karl Marx was the materialist philosopher who put forward the term Marxism. His remarkable contribution lies in the materialist interpretation of history. Economic determinism is the primary assumption put forward by Marx, which suggests that the primary human motivation is economic. He defined the foundation of society as economic. Marxist philosophy focused on the powers exerted by the dominant class on the subordinate classes. This, in turn, affected not only the middle class but also the lowest subordinate class to a large extent.

In the 1850s, Karl Marx made general statements about culture and society. The two well-known statements by Marx provide a sufficient point to his contribution to the literary theory. "It is not the consciousness of men that determines their being, but, on the contrary, their social being that determines their consciousness" (K.S and Varghese 51). A prominent example of such a social being is described in the novel *The Selection* through the various characters among whom the protagonist America Singer is more significant.

"Marxism analyses the socio-economic aspects in terms of conflict" (Varghese 27). The competition between different social classes in history has inspired the writers to create literature that specifically exposes class struggle ideas. According to the Marxian concept, the economy was the driving force behind society. Marx conceived government as a tool of oppression that manipulated cultural elements in society to the advantage of those who controlled the economy. In the class struggle, he finds the key to the understanding of history.

Louis Althusser developed the concept of ideology, which he termed as Ideological State Apparatuses. These are not directly imposed but arise from within society. Later, Antonio Gramsci, an Italian Marxist philosopher, anticipated some of Althusser's theories on ideology and coined the term hegemony. His concept is related to ideology and hegemony as both are indirectly imposed, and the former is the leadership indirectly exercised by the ruling class. Social stratification is done according to the upper class's ideas, and influences exerted on the lower class.

Kiera Cass's novel *The Selection* portrays the social stratification existing

in the Ilea kingdom. Glancing through the Marxist lens of hegemony, the novel mirrors certain nonsensical norms of the society that still prevails - the caste differentiation. The novel covertly displays the suppression of subordinates by the ruler in power. It also brings into light the various factors responsible for the lowest rung's poor lives. This sociological division has created trepidation and subdued attitude in the minds of people and a more serious crisis that is a threat to survival. "Social stratification can be interpreted as a societal distinction into various classes" (Nungkiastuti 1). The novel elaborates on the life of each caste which is controlled by the One caste.

Image of the royal family is portrayed in the novel where the term domination can be sensed. The One or the royal family lives a luxurious life where they do not have to worry about money or power. The power is vested in their hands. In the novel, the people have to watch television to know about the updates of the selection process which itself gives an idea of the royal family's fame, wealth and acceptance in society. Their appearance declares their pride and fame as it is said in the lines that they were seated in 'throne-like seats' and 'clad in elegant clothes' (Cass 40). In property, wealth, fame and status, the first caste is the ideal one in society.

The second caste is being referred to in the novel in the form of two professions- a soldier and a model. "It was a blessing in that being a soldier meant you were an automatic Two. The government trained you and paid you for the rest of your life. The drawback was you never knew where you would go. They sent you away from your province, for sure" (Cass 67). Here begins the control of the first caste over the second. The soldiers, although being provided with all their needs, have to follow the next steps of their life according to the royal rules. There is no other choice for them. They may either lose their life or have to stay away from their home. This context can be related to the present-day scenario where the government controls the life of the soldiers. Either they will die in a war or will have to stay away from their family. The reason for the people to select such a job is that they will be treated fairly all their lives with better wages. Even when their wives become widows, the ruling government takes care of them. But human life is more precious than a material possession which is being replaced here. This is an instance where the dominant establishes their power making the subordinate feel that they have a choice. But to be precise, they are given a choice to be inferior to them and not to live fairly like the One.

"This person whom I recognized as Celeste Newsome of Clermont, Two,

did not bother me" (Cass 82). Relating the life of a soldier to a model, there is still some difference although both are in the same boat. A person becomes a model when he or she can entertain others in any way they can. Generally speaking, a model's life runs smoothly. But there is another side in their life just like a coin has two sides on its own. In the novel, Celeste is viewed by others as an arrogant and villainous character who is selfish. But she should have faced many difficulties in her life. Adopting her viewpoint, life may seem unending for her because she has been trained to entertain others all her life. She does not find her happiness in the midst of this. All her life, she has to pretend before others without exposing her true nature. This is similar to the case of the models in the present day. People see them as individuals having a luxurious life. But they do not get their space in their life. Instead, they are forced to bear with the presence of cameras in their lives.

The third caste Three is considered as one of the high castes and is defined as the elite. They are just under the second caste and hence, One, Two and Three castes are considered as a group of high castes, to be precise, elites. But when the reality is looked upon, certain discrimination can also be seen in the third caste as they are still subordinate to the first and second castes. The role of the third caste in the society is described in these lines. "Your aide will assist you with final preparations before you leave for the palace, as well as help you seek new housing and employment afterward. Should you make it to the top ten, you will be considered an elite...From this moment on, your status is a Three" (Cass 63).

Here, status Three is given to the ones who are promoted as elites in the Selection process. They are sheltered in the palace and their family is compensated with wealth. Some aides will assist them in final preparations before they leave the palace. The third caste is in one way living a smooth life as they do not have to worry about their employment and housing. But they have to work under the first caste and have to learn about the particular inner workings of life and the obligations they would have as princesses. They are not permitted to be like this if they do not belong to Three. However, the third caste is also subjugated in one way or another. This division is done by the ruler in power. The first three castes are grouped under the high caste category. This is evident in these lines: "Twos and Threes do fine, but Fours and below tend to struggle" (Cass 63). This says that Twos and Threes have a good life which is not as terrible and devastating as the lives of the rest of the subordinates.

From the next caste begins the economic and social oppression they face in

their life just because they are allowed to do those particular jobs.

If you were a Four or worse, they left you to fend for yourselves. This had been the subject of many arguments for us over the last six months when we seriously started trying to find a way to be together. Children were the wild card. The more you had, the more there was to work. But then again, so many hungry mouths. (Cass 20)

The fourth caste is the caste from which the problem of hunger begins. The above lines give the idea of how they are struggling hard for a meal. They have to survive based on how many children they have. The more children they have, the more they need to work for earning money to meet their daily necessities. The fourth caste involves factory workers, farmers, etc. The four and the below caste tend to struggle in food consumption. The family consisting of three or four children have to adjust and at most, they thrive hardly. The increase in death rate starts from this caste where many children as well as people, die due to hunger and poverty which is the major crisis faced by the people of this caste. Here the dominant class takes control of them and gives them an option which is, in fact, a way of suppressing them indirectly by providing the things they lack. The royal family arranged the Selection process for people like this so that they can be directly promoted to Three and can enjoy the palace life. This, in turn, is an example of ideological state apparatuses where the ideology of the dominant is expressed indirectly thereby making the subordinates realize that this pertains to their welfare. Thus, the dominant can establish their rule upon them by promising them a better life and new caste. "New home, new caste, new life" (Cass 79).

The fifth caste is the same as the second caste as they are given jobs as artists and musicians. The only difference is in the income which is extremely tight compared to the Second caste. "Our caste was just three away from the bottom. We were artists. And artists and classical musicians were only three steps up from dirt literally. Our money was stretched as tight as a high wire, and our income was highly dependent on the changing seasons" (Cass 3-4). Another indifferent attitude shown by the ruling class is evident in these lines. Money is what everyone needs for survival. The second caste is not at all different from the fifth caste but how they differ from the rest is by the economical aspect. That is the main reason why they are not able to survive or stay healthy. People who thrive in such harsh circumstances are often attracted to the competition like the one held by the royal family. This can be considered as an aspect of imposing

power upon the people. The ruling class knows how they can suppress people and then they find a way to indirectly impose their power upon them by claiming that these are done for their welfare.

Louis Althusser develops the concept of ideology through what he terms as Ideological State Apparatuses (ISA), a way in which state controls people not directly or through externally imposed forms of ideological coercion but from within the society. They include areas such as religion, the legal system, education and culture, the media or communications, the various conventions of family life. (Webster 61)

The social constructs are often formed through the people who have the authority. They are more likely to create constructs that will be favourable for them as well as a so-called favour for the subordinates. These people do not think about other people's lives and their struggles. They are not ready to equate themselves with the subordinates who are equal to them in form. This novel deeply explores the supremacy established by the rulers over the suppressed classes. It covertly displays the Marxian concepts put forward by Althusser and Gramsci.

Althusser views literature generally as performing a rather ambiguous function in that it both acts as a form of ideology, this blinding people to their real conditions of existence, but also is capable of detaching itself from the very ideology in which it participates, thus drawing attention to the imaginary relations which it describes. (Webster 72)

The sixth caste is the next caste closer to the last one. They are well trained for indoor work. They are servants. Even though they are smart and handsome, society considers them as poor and lower. For marriage, it is difficult for them to get someone as they are not eligible from the viewpoint of society. Even if they are married, then they have to work on different papers of interrogation for the fulfilment of their desire in life. Filling of paperwork takes almost ninety days which is, to be precise, the time given to change their minds. Since childhood, Sixes think that they are born to serve. They went to public schools and had only actual grade levels. This was the condition of the Sixes.

Aspen was a Six. Sixes were servants and only a step up from sevens in that they were better educated and trained for indoor work. Aspen was smarter than anyone knew and devastatingly

handsome, but it was atypical for a woman to marry down. A man from a lower caste could ask for your hand, but it was rare to get a yes. And when anyone married into a different caste, they had to fill out paperwork and wait for something like ninety days before any of the other legal things you needed could be done. I'd heard more than one person say it was to give people a chance to change their minds. So, us being this personal and out well past Illea's curfew... we could both get in serious trouble. Not to mention the hell I'd get from my mother. (Cass 15)

The next caste is the Seventh caste. They include workers, beggars, etc. These people do not have good clothes to wear compared to the royal who wear elegant clothes. They earn for a day's meal and these are not even sufficient for themselves. Most of them lead a penniless life and they find it difficult to sustain themselves. The following lines show us how their appearance proves their poor lives. These people are not considered in society as men or women. On the contrary, they are given the title of beggars or mere workers who are just born to wander in the streets. The most painful lives are led by these people including women and children who survive with one time meal. They live each day to keep them alive. They just thrive amid all sufferings such as poverty, hunger, loss of beloved, exclusion from the kingdom, etc. "Just behind us was a girl, obviously a seven, still in her work clothes. Her muddy boots might not make the picture, the dust on her overalls probably would. A few yards back another seven was sporting a tool belt. The best I could say about her was that her face was clean" (Cass 34).

The last caste is the Eighth caste which has been considered as the most unhealthy and illegal caste. These people thrive for nothing but just to have a pointless life. They are not born as Eights but are created. This is evident in the following lines.

The law, Illean law, was that you were to wait until marriage. It was an effective way of keeping diseases at bay, and it helped keep the castes intact. illegitimates were thrown into the street to become Eights, and the penalty for being discovered, either by a person or through pregnancy, was jail time. if someone was even suspicious, you could spend a few nights in a cell. (Cass 65)

Eights are thrown into the streets just because they engage in intimacy in their relationships. They do not have the right to choose their partners according to their choice. Even these are the choices provided by the Roy-

alty, interfering in their personal lives. These are heinous and arrogant attitudes of the dominant society to these people. They are thrown into the streets because this is one of the penalties for their doings which is in fact, way too sophisticated and terrible. These people are left isolated and their identity changes to that of the illegitimates of the legitimate country. Even the transition of the identity of an individual is decided by autonomy or the ruler in power. This instance is, in fact, disgraceful not only to society but also to the individuals in power. The society is actually in a trance, infused with the ideologies put forward by the dominant in their minds. The society is moulded into the way which is appreciated by the ruler in power. But the people who protest are considered as mere subordinates who are being refused their power to protest.

“Rather than possessing individual freedom and a unique, unified consciousness, people as subjects were now viewed as socially constructed through language, or discourse, and the various institutions and forms of communication which circulated and reinforced the sense of individual identity” (Webster 84). People are losing their own identity in a powerful world where they are led by an authority. They are liable to change their opinions about the orders and instructions put forward by the higher caste.

Cass, in her novel, depicts a romantic story of the Prince and the Princess-to-be along with the struggles of poverty, hunger, and discrimination based on caste and their professions. The society is blind to see the truth and is open to false accusations. Stealing is considered as a crime. Those who steal are considered as robbers. If the society takes a true glimpse of the life of these people, they will definitely change their mindset towards them instead of judging them as thieves. Knowing the real reason behind the theft will make those people hold their heads down in shame. This kind of theft is a way to survive amid hunger and poverty. Theft is considered as a great crime and the accused person is punished severely in such a pitiful situation. All he or she has done is stealing water and food to quench their thirst and satisfy their stomach. Food and water are natural resources but these are sold as commodities in retail price which makes it unaffordable for these poor people to buy them.

Subordinates are made to feel that all the notions circulated in the society through dominants are right and that they have to follow them strictly to sustain themselves in the country. This is claimed to be a privilege offered by the superior ones to the inferior to exert their power upon them. Unknowingly, they become subordinates to the ruler in power losing their

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own identity and status in the society. Once lost, their identity is imprinted on them by the norms of the royalty.

According to Gramsci, "the ruling classes have been able to exercise leadership not through direct coercion but by indirect means; through what he defined as the concept of hegemony" (Webster 63). This term is relevant in today's world in the case of self-rule. The high caste is the one that defines the life structure of each of the castes which come under it. The high caste enjoys exerting all the powers upon the so-called inferiors, ignoring their freedom, status and wealth. Hegemony works out through a concept called ideology which is also one of the relevant literary terms in Marxism. The ideology is passed throughout the society. The citizens of the country are manipulated by the supreme forces and this, in turn, creates a division between themselves. These ideologies claim to "reveal the hidden or illusionary aspect of forms of knowledge but may present themselves as neutral or something normal" (Webster 62).

The protagonist America Singer's lifestyle can be used to know the transition the society wants in an individual, according to the rule. Her character gets transformed from the beginning of the novel to the end. The character, at first, is rebellious and refuses to apply for the Selection. She is concerned about Aspen who is her lover. She never even thinks of leaving him even if he is a Six. Aspen tells America to leave him just because he thinks he will not be able to provide for her. But she never let her mind to think of such things and assures him that no matter what happens she will not leave him. Aspen compels her to apply for the Selection and thus, due to the compulsion from her mother and lover, she applies. Unfortunately, she gets selected and this is considered as a fortune by her family as well as by her lover. But Aspen has another plan of which he thinks and thus, indulges in compelling her to apply for the process.

Later, there occurs a break up between them when America has to go to the palace. America, as described, is rebellious and she knows the difficulty of life as a Five. But as soon as she gets selected, she is instantly elevated to Three. She has lived her life as a Five but later, the palace life rules her. America who is a singer is given a relaxed life in the palace. But she would have to adhere to the rules and terms of the King. She is, in turn, elevated to Three which shows that only a Three can experience the life of One. That is the minimum qualification expected of an individual to enjoy the palace life. The people who belong to other castes except Two and Three are considered as worthless in society. They are just part of the kingdom for serving the rulers and high castes. One caste is utilizing every oppor-

tunity to bring others under its control.

America is a girl who fights for wrongness in society. But she adheres to the rules of the palace. She becomes a part of the palace. The politics of classism is evident here. "History isn't something you study. It's something you should just know" (Cass 211). History is not something that they should study. It is something that they should only have a mere glimpse of so that they would not be a hindrance to the ruler in power. This is taught in the palace where they spend a lot of their time in moulding simple girls into princesses. They are unaware of the fact that these are being imposed upon them indirectly. They believe that these are for the sake of being a princess. Once they finish the training, they would have a prestigious life and experience. In the novel, America tries to understand the rebel attacks but she is, in turn, put off from official royal matters by Prince Maxon. Instead, she is given the choice to enjoy the royal life. She is indeed delightful about leisure life as she chooses to adhere to the terms and conditions of the King. She is also deeply attracted to Prince Maxon as she tries to know more about his life which, in turn, is the life of One.

"Hegemony, according to different interpretations, is the active social and cultural forces" (Williams 108). The hegemony exists as a result of the formation of a group of subordinates. They are given the chance to exercise their power upon others just because they are dominant in wealth, status and possession of the property. Once there occurs a banishment of the inferior groups, there is no power and rule.

In Marxism, haves and have-nots are the ones with whom the power is vested. Haves suppress have-nots through their norms and notions. Have-nots, on the other hand, try to protest against the rule. This, in the end, goes in vain in most situations. The protagonist is a have-not at the beginning of the novel. Once she decides to confide to the royal terms and rules of the haves, she is instantly elevated to the position of a have. This proves that she is not accepted as a Five and should change her status and identity in the society to be a princess which is also a reproduction of the hierarchical rule of the kingdom. Haves subjugate the have-nots without resorting to any form of violence. This is what Althusser tries to define in his conception of ideology in his book *Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses*.

Marxist Criticism suggests that all cultural forms seek to ensure that the dominant classes in society remain dominant. To do so, it must convince the working classes and the oppressed not to rebel

or revolt. The dominant classes usually achieve this by suggesting to the working classes that the present social condition is natural, benevolent and ultimately beneficial to them. (Nayar 128)

This is exactly what takes place in the novel which is an outline of post-World War III. All cultural forms seek to ensure the domineering nature of the high class in society. They try to inundate the present social condition as worthwhile and lucrative. Understanding the consequences as well as the repercussions of dominancy, the higher ensures that the people are given what they want. Through various cultural forms, they make sure that they are not hindered in their dominant business. Such cultural representations review the existing economic way of life with which the dominant classes retain their power in society.

The same context is comparable to the course of the period when India was under the British crown. The hegemony conquered all the colonies restricting them from their freedom and inducing their rule upon them. While some Indians were protesting against the rule, some of them were given employment opportunities under the rule which, in turn, provided them with a better life. This transition from poor economic conditions to a better life compels many people to become subject to the authorities. The real economic conditions in society have an ideology through which subjugation is accomplished. The oppressed classes consider the inequality and injustices prevailing in society as reasonable. Thus, naturalising the economic oppression and inequality and paves way to their subjugation. "Hegemony is the domination of particular sections of society by the powerful classes not necessarily through threats of violence or the law but by winning their consent to be governed and dominated. Hegemony, like ideology, works less through coercion than through consent" (Nayar 130).

What working-class Americans and people of colour have viscerally recognized as the casteist ideologies- the theories that produce a social hierarchy and then freeze it for time immemorial (The Conversation). Though America as a caste-free society exists in the minds of the people, the inequality and violence based on caste and colour are still prevailing and this exists as a social hierarchy. The American social hierarchy and the social hierarchy depicted in the novel are similar. Cass got her inspiration for writing this novel from amalgamating Esther's and Cinderella's stories. She thought of creating a unique plot where a poor girl seeks the attention of a prince. This, in turn, can be interpreted as a poor class seeking the attention of the elite people to survive in society.

In this novel, the stratification is emphasized where the caste system, in turn, results in conflicts in the kingdom. The key concept in Marxism, ideology is specified to show how subjugation occurs. Gramsci's hegemony is an association of ideology. Both are intertwined to produce a society where the rule turns people into mere subjects.

### **Conclusion**

In a country with hegemonic power, the interconnections between such power and the society are irremovable. The society accepts and lives the norms of the power thereby giving the consent to establish dominancy over them. The novel exposes the struggles faced by the inferior ones especially by portraying them as the Four to Six castes. Cass has succeeded in creating this novel as a dystopian and romantic young adult fiction but also in clearly manifesting its power conflict through the demonstration of rebel conflicts and the struggles between the high and low classes.

Another important aspect discussed in the novel is the priority. The priority status reaches to a high level when one is selected for the Selection process. Once a girl lives a palace life adhering to the rules and regulations of the king, she is given a higher priority in her life even if she gets eliminated from the process. This is evident in the following lines where Maxon tries to encourage America to face the crowd. "When you leave here, eyes will be on you for the rest of your life. My mom still talks to some of the women she was with when she went through the selection. They are all viewed as important women. Still" (Cass 189). In this way, the rule gains the favour of the subjects.

I am the young man, full of strength and hope,

Tangled in that ancient endless chain

Of profit, power, gain, of grab the land!

Of grab the gold! Of grab the ways of satisfying need!

Of work the men! Of take the pay!

Of owning everything for one's own greed! (Nair and Var-  
ghese 40).

This poem written by Hughes presents an America which has lost its freedom and equality. Through the lines, it is evident that how power grabs

the profit, land, and life of the people. America has lost its past and, now, certain ideals hamper the freedom and justice in the country. This can be reflected in the future America portrayed in Cass's novel *The Selection*. The people in Illea have lost their past freedom and equality, and are being suppressed by the rule through ideologies.

The novel, *The Selection*, in its form is a dystopia wherein the palace life is threatening due to the involvement of rebels and violence. This happens as a consequence of the underprivileged classes' immediate actions or survival tendencies. From a romance novel to a dystopian world, the futuristic Illea is indeed a wild creation of the author describing the caste system, romance, rebel conflicts, inequality, injustice and the dominance of the higher social classes.

Cass depicts a picture of rule and its subordinates' struggle. In other words, the class struggle during which one class gains power over the other bringing it under control is apparent in the plot. In the novel, the struggle between the higher and lower caste is portrayed along with a hint on how the ideologies and notions are circulated through the society for the sake of benefit of the lower castes. A prominent example is the Selection process in the novel. The rule tries to control the poor people offering them wealth and honouring them with good status in society. Through the character America Singer, the novel discusses how people are attracted to such offers provided by higher caste and how they adapt to their norms once they enjoy leisure life. Thus, the study intends to specifically expose the stratification in society discussed in the novel clearly justifying the close link between ideology and hegemony.

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