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Decoding the Institution of Marriage: A Semiotic Interpretation of Vasanth Kannabiran's *Pankaja*

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Abstract

Marriage, as a social institution, is encoded with multiple layers of meaning. The semiotic interpretation of marriage as a code signifies, how various sign systems – such as caste, religion, and gender – interact and intersect with each other in the formulation of marital code. This research paper probes into the dynamics of endogamy and exogamy in Vasanth Kannabiran's novel *Pankaja* examining how the marital choices of protagonists Jaganathan and Kannamma reflect the tension between individual desire and entrenched societal norms. Offering insights on how diverse sign systems influence and shape the institution of marriage. Delving into the underlying sign systems that contribute to the framework of marriage, it investigates the influence of social systems and its stratifications on the marital institution. The paper also highlights the role of marriage as a deterministic social system in the manifestation of human emotions such as shame, guilt, fear, and honour.

Keywords: Marriage, endogamy, exogamy, sign systems, code.

The institution of marriage is a time-honoured code for selecting one's life partner, which is a resultant of "reciprocal typification of habitualized actions" (Berger & Luckmann 72). The institution holds a universal pattern in establishing family units, maintaining kinship ties, and it varies from place to place according to the culture, tradition, religion, law, economy, social norms and spatiotemporal difference of the people.

The institution of marriage is an intricate amalgamation of coded social structures such as, class, caste, religion and gender. The Webster's Seventh New Collegiate Dictionary defines marriage as "the institution whereby men and women are joined in a special kind of social and legal dependence for the purpose of founding and maintaining a family" (518). The institution plays a vital role in influencing the action of an individual and also in the manifestation of human feelings and emotions.

In India, society which is intricately entwined with patriarchal and caste hierarchies, marriage performs a deterministic function of controlling and regulating patriarchy and caste hegemony. And

hence marriages are inevitably arranged and to choose a partner for love would be a taboo, which can in worst cases end up in honour killing or being excommunicated.

The Brahminical marriage code insists the practice of observing strict endogamy to maintain closed communities and enforce rigid social hierarchies. "The superposition of endogamy on exogamy means the creation of caste" (Ambedkar 9). Endogamy, often termed as the closed-door system is a pertinent form of practice that prevailed in the Hindu society for reinforcing the purity of the Brahminic caste but through imitation the endogamous system of marriage got ventured into the non-Brahminic castes prompting different caste groups. "It is "the infection of imitation" that caught all these subdivisions on their onward march of differentiation and has turned them into castes" (Ambedkar 25). For which, the social pressure of the society employed as a tool of manifestation to condition and dictate people to practice endogamy. "Caste in India means an artificial chopping off of the population into fixed and definite units, each one prevented from fusing into another through the custom of endogamy" (Ambedkar 7).

The Shastras and the laws ordained by law-givers like Manu in his book, *Manusmriti* had promoted blind acceptance and unquestionability as "... it is ordained by the Shastras and the Shastras cannot be wrong" (Ambedkar 22) which in turn made the people the victims of caste. In the name of orthodoxy, the religious texts promoted untouchability by drawing imaginary boundary and segregated people into hierarchical groups based on the varna system of classification and restricting the mobility between the caste groups. The Brahminical superiority is strictly regulated by caste hegemony that provides the 'Idea of pollution' raising from "priestly ceremonialism" and "general belief in purity" (Ambedkar 5).

The fundamental codes of rituals and scriptures had elevated Brahmins as superior, powerful and associates of Gods. "It was not such a simple task to take on the Brahmins since they had the support of all the other castes. And they controlled the big Gods: the powerful ones" (Kannabiran 135). The religion treated Brahmins as pure and divine and labelled so-called low-caste people as impure and pollute. But it is ridiculous that marrying a so-called low-caste will spoil their purity but not the act of sleeping with a so-called low-caste.

The Brahminical patriarchy subjugates woman under the control of man and determines her participation in the society only in the domestic sphere. The endogamous marriage effectively controlled the sexuality of woman as she holds the key to procreation. Through cultural norms, woman's sexuality is controlled to preserve the caste purity, as the community believed that intermixing with other caste would pollute them. "The central factor for the subordination of the upper caste woman: the need for effective sexual control over such women to maintain not only patrilineal succession but also caste purity, the institution unique to Hindu society" (Chakravarti 579).

The research paper problematizes the intricately coded social institution of marriage and proposes to question the institution through different sign systems such as caste, religion and gender which amalgamates to form a holistic institution of marriage and also, sheds light on how human emotions manifest and interplay in the production and interpretation of meaning within the marital code.

The research incorporates semiotic lens to decode the multiple layers of meaning that revolves around the code. As a body of knowledge, semiotics contributes to the scientific study of signs and sign-based behaviour. The Online Etymology Dictionary traces the root word of semiotics from the Greek word *sēmeiōtikos* which means, "observant of signs" and linguistically as "of pertaining to the use of signs" (web). Sign can be anything that stands for something other than itself. According to the Italian literary critic and semiotician Umberto Eco, "semiotics is concerned with everything that can be taken as a sign" (qtd in Chandler 2). Within the code, the signs are clustered together to form meaningful sign systems. "Codes organize signs into meaningful systems which correlate signifiers and

signified through the structural forms of syntagms and paradigms" (Chandler 147). The signs make sense only when it is interpreted within the code. Codes as framework of signs are packed with social dimension and cultural aspects in it. "Codes are not simply 'conventions' of communication but rather procedural systems of related conventions which operates in certain domains" (Chandler 148).

A text is a written symbolic code of discourse. "There is no intelligible discourse without the operation of a code" (Chandler 148). The Semiotic analysis of a text takes into consideration of the several codes and the relationship that is established in the text. "A range of typologies of codes can be found in the literature of semiotics" (Chandler 149). Therefore, it is essential to dissect and decode the codes, sub-codes, and the underlying sign system which enables us to interpret and figure out all the possible and invisible layers of meanings embedded in the text.

Vasanth Kannabiran's *Pankaja* is a record of collected anecdotes that revolves around the institution of marriage as arranged and observed by many generations of Brahmin family during the early twentieth century. The novel sheds light on how this institution stratifies people into different sects based on their caste, religion and gender thereby enforcing social hierarchies. Capturing multiple standpoints, the literary work documents multiple responses and reactions supporting and opposing the institution of marriage.

The research paper intends to analyse two parallel narratives from the novel *Pankaja* that revolves around the exogamous marital relationship of Jaganathan and Kannamma.

The first narrative presents the forced exogamous marital life encountered by Jaganathan, the heir of Brahminical family, who had a secret affair with a Mala girl named, Krupa. Mala, a Telugu caste which occupies the so-called low-caste status within the Hindu hierarchical framework. Jagan craved for sexual relationship with Krupa but he did not want to marry her because of her caste. But he is forced into marriage by Krupa's relatives. Driven by the desires of flesh and preoccupied with caste norms, Jagan wished to have a non-committal relationship as he did not want to marry a woman from another caste, that might threaten his caste superiority.

Jagan's strong impulse of calling off his marriage proposal with Krupa was because of his strong adherence to the Brahminical codes practiced among his community members. The awareness of potential rejection and excommunication that accompanied outcaste marriage significantly influenced his decision. To avoid marrying Krupa, he devised a plan to flee to Madras at a right time to escape the dire consequences. This act reveals his priorities: a superficial desire for Krupa's body, a lack of genuine love for her, and his adherence to caste norms. But when Krupa's relatives found out his motives, the community rallied against him and forced him to marry Krupa.

The group of Mala men surrounded Jagan and threatening him with violence that if he ruins the life of a girl from their community then he has to pay his life as a compensation for his act. "'Hey! Bapana Lanzhakoduka (Brahmin whoreson)! Do you think you can get away with ruining one of our girls?'" (Kannabiran 133). Though he is averse to marry an outcaste person like Krupa but now, giving in to marrying a so-called low-caste person, has turned to be an only option for Jagan to save his life. "Marrying a Mala girl? Was that his only option to get out of this alive? 'No! No! I want to marry her!' he blurted out in sheer fright" (Kannabiran 133-134). In response, a social marriage was arranged with the support of Communist Party leaders at the Town Hall where Jagan and Krupa exchanged their garlands and a "Gordian Knot!" (Kannabiran 134) was made.

While endogamy promotes arranged marriage as a cultural norm, the radical ideologies of communist party advocated social marriage as an alternative solution towards the problem and challenges the notion of traditional marital practices. The community reinforced the social marriage, under the threat of Jagan's life. Jagan's scheme of having an illicit affair tends to be an enforcement of

endogamous marriage to preserve caste purity and their Brahmanical patriarchy which consolidates power within the society.

The Brahminical marital codes inscribed in him prohibits intercaste marriage but on the other hand, it does not prohibit extra marital source of satisfying the desire of the flesh. The inheritance of communal codes of Manu streamlined Jagan's attitude, thinking that the illicit act of sleeping with a Mala woman was not so much wrong, but marrying her could be a bigger taboo. The Brahminical marital code only approves, recognizes and values endogamous union among couples and only accepted the offspring from such union as the legal heirs. Therefore, Jagan did not feel guilty for his act of seducing a so-called low-caste woman or neglecting the marriage with her.

The norms of the community were justified in the name of caste and gained power in terms of Brahminical patriarchy. In terms of caste, the code of endogamous marriage signifies the exercise of power. The power had conditioned the so-called low-caste people to blindly accept the code imposed upon them by muting their voices completely in the social sphere. Jagan, a member of the Brahmin elite, was no exception to these norms but a sole representative of Brahminical hegemony. Krupa for Jagan was only an object meant for enjoyment and so expendable. Jagan's ideology of objectifying woman was predominant among the other male members of the community. "Female flesh like, fresh air and water, was meant for their enjoyment alone" (Kannabiran 132). Further, the patriarchal system suppressed the female voices of the upper-caste community by which man gained the power to do anything according to their wish and will. Therefore, the community considered that, "It was alright to sleep with a Mala woman, all of them did...But marriage!" (Kannabiran 142), adhered strictly to endogamy.

The record of responses over Jagan's violation and breaking of the marital codes among different social sects of the region brings into light how human emotions are blended with the socio-cultural norms of the society. The Communist party officers and Mala youth rejoiced enthusiastically, honouring the marriage as a victory over the evil caste system. Meanwhile, the caste elders of the Mala community worried about the aftermath, accustomed with fear. "What price would they have to pay for this?... Was this any victory at all? What good could come of this so-called marriage?" (Kannabiran 134). In due course, the news struck the Brahmin quarter like a huge crack of thunder, freezing the entire community in shame. "The only son of the leading Brahmin families marrying a Mala girl!" (Kannabiran 134).

The immediate response of the Brahmin quarter after hearing the news of marriage between Jagan and Krupa was,

There was total silence. The usual chants of holy verses were not to be heard. The smell of incense did not linger in the ominous, dark silence. Even the fires were not lit in many of the houses. The shame, the sheer horror of it, made them all retreat into the dark. (Kannabiran 139)

Jagan's act made his father Parthasarathy to mask his face with the towel as he walked along the streets of the Brahmin quarter. He felt embarrassed and deeply ashamed to defend the questions put forth by his own community members and also suffered a torment from the personal guilt of raising his son with utter lack of principles. He could not digest to the fact therefore, "Covering his face with a towel, he flung himself face down on his cot" (Kannabiran 139). Jagan's mother struck her head against the walls of the house, seeking to ease her emotional anguish through physical pain, but found her inner torment far outweighed than her physical suffering.

As the news spread like a fire, the Brahmin quarter held heated debate. The family lost its reputation and recognition. The community members made crucial comments as follows,

...the man hooted and slapped his mouth and cheeks. He mimicked the act of a shoe being stitched. Then, he indicated a girl, the cobbler's daughter. And made the signs of marriage: *taali*

and *bottu*. He began to beat himself on the head and slap his cheeks and signal that the whole town was talking. (Kannabiran 142)

The dire consequences of inter-caste marriages were rejection and excommunication from both the family and the society. Jagan's family disrupts the connection with Jagan and the family excluded him. The exclusion was not the only response for marrying a so-called low-caste woman but the son was assumed to dead by the family members and performed death rituals while he was still alive.

Parthasarathy went in and had a bath with his clothes on as one would after a funeral. His wife sobbed, murmuring, 'no...no.' He flung his towel at her. She too had a bath while chanting 'Govinda, Govinda! Save him' (Kannabiran 140). The act of taking bath is usually performed after the funeral in the family so this symbolic act of bathing represents the last rite performed for a living son, who deconstructed the honoured code of endogamous marriage.

It is typical that, violating the caste norms strips the value as a human being within the community. The family members hanged Jagan's photo on the wall and placed few flowers on it to symbolize and commemorate their assumption of Jagan's death.

Finally, Penda put up a picture of her brother on the wall of the front room. Her mother stuck a flower under the frame. Jagan was now safely consigned to the realm of dead. (Kannabiran 140)

But Jagan could not hold out for a long time. He did not feel belonged in his marriage to a Mala girl and he was yearning to go back to his past life. And when he saw his father in a public place, he decided to leave Krupa and break the exogamous marriage. "Clearing his throat, [Jagan's father said], 'you will have to undergo a *prayaschittam* (purification) if you want to enter my house'" (Kannabiran 145). He decided to return to the fold, paying the price of transgression. The Brahminical code had prescribed purity rites for coming back. "After several dips in the Vaigai and a sacred thread ceremony on its banks, Jagan was taken home." (Kannabiran 145) by his father where Jagan's mother performed "... a camphor *aarti* (ritual), tears flowing freely down her cheeks, took his hand and let him in." (Kannabiran 146). He now did not have any qualms deserting Krupa and has repaired the breach he had committed in breaking the deeply entrenched code of Brahminical hegemony. Jagan lacked the moral courage to stand up against all the indoctrination of the so-called superiority of caste. He is not only a victim of the codifying grasp of marriage institution but by making amends to his transgressive exogamous marriage, he also becomes the perpetrator of the system.

The second narrative centres around the marriage that happened in the Brahmin Kandala house, between Kannamma and her cousin Sampath. Kuppamma, Kannamma's mother, learned through gossip that her daughter planned to elope with her music teacher, who is from a supposedly lower caste. To preserve endogamy, Kuppamma compelled Kannamma into a marriage within their own caste. Kannamma ended her forced endogamous marriage after five years by finally eloping with a mridangam player ascribed with the so-called low-caste pariah identity. Kannamma found love and acceptance in this marriage, for which she flouted the established, deterministic Brahminical codes of endogamous marriage.

In contrast to Jagan, Kannamma braved an exogamous marriage because of her growing dejection over his husband's attitude towards money which had made him stingy in the due course of time. "Family, five children and a stingy husband did not fulfil her needs" (Kannabiran 80). When Kannamma realised the fact that Sampath was a wrong match for her she resolved to terminate her marital life and eloped to marry the mridangam player. Therefore, Kannamma's decision completely destroyed the marital codes of her community.

Similarly, in the case of Kannamma what stung the community was her brazen defiance over caste and tradition. By marrying a so-called low-caste and living along with him "She had flung so much dirty linen into the public" (Kannabiran 82).

They did not spit in the face of caste norms. As long as one was discreet and careful, people were tolerant. This brazen defiance of caste and tradition was intolerable. But alas, this was not a community known for physical violence. They had manipulated the violence of other communities to their advantage through their learning. (Kannabiran 82-83)

She lived openly in the *cheri* (slum) on the banks of the Buckingham canal between Narasimhapuram and Luz Corner. This made their community members to cross the bridge and take another route along the Kapalishwaran Temple Tank Road instead of taking the slum route which served as a shortcut to reach Luz Corner to avail access to the public amenities like shops, banks, hotels and bus stops.

It was a great insult for her Brahmin relatives and they wished not to encounter her again. "The shame of seeing her sitting cheerfully on the doorstep of her hut, her hair loose, sipping the tea she had brought from a tea vendor, was humiliating" (Kannabiran 81). They regret her act of shameless infringe, "'Aiyoo! Karmame! Jyeshte! Jyeshte!' What a terrible fate! Disgusting! Disgusting!) They muttered, shuddering in revulsion and horror." (Kannabiran 81) and her response as if nothing could stop her in the name of codes. "She was utterly shameless, looking straight at them and not even making an attempt to hide her face or look away" (Kannabiran 81). They feared that she might offer a welcome to her house at *cheri*.

Sometimes, they would see her sitting at a roadside cafe near the temple sharing a glass of tea with her *maddaliga*, when they took the Kapalishwar Tank Road. "'Filthy wretch! Why doesn't she drop dead? Can't she even buy herself a cup of tea? How obscene!' They exclaimed, shocked by her brazenness" (Kannabiran 81-82).

Both Jaganathan and Kannamma transgressed the strict endogamous marital codes but the only difference was that, it was a forced decision in the case of Jagan and a free will decision for Kannamma. Her strong determination and her defiance over exogamous marriage contrasted starkly to that of Jagan's. The shock of marrying a non-Brahmin, was similar in both cases, but Jagan's submission to the system made him the victim and perpetrator of the tyrannical code unlike Kannamma whose defiance shattered the sacred code and escaped the shackles of the endogamous marriage. Her decision and action ruptured the long-preserved tradition of the sacrosanct code of the Brahmin community.

For Jagan, codes of the society mattered more than his personal wish and will. His life was not for love but meant for compliance to the given codes. He yearned for recognition, respect and reputation from the society which in turn made him the victim of the codes within which the society operates. Both the parents and the community demanded too much of sacrifice which was too costly to repay.

So true! His eyes prickled with bitter tears. A few moments of innocent fun and his life had spun out of control. Was he evil or wicked? Had he ever intentionally hurt anyone? He had married Krupa when her people demanded it. She had been wearied of him and his inability to hold a steady job. His father had taken back in the end. The only son systerwhom he needed to perform his last rites! And he had patiently gone through the purification rites and adjusted to a sober life. What more could he have done? (Kannabiran 152-153)

But Kannamma flouted the norms of the society. For her life was for love and not meant to quench the thirst of the society. She as an individual had made a wise decision by disregarding the

norms of the society to overcome the web of systems that caught her and escaped of being a victim of the code by shattering and decoding the behemoth of endogamous marriage.

Make every man and women free from the thralldom of the Shastras, cleanse their minds of the pernicious notion founded on the Shastras, and he or she will inter-dine and intermarry, without your telling him or her to do so. (Ambedkar 68)

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