

‘Thule Kami’ as a Proletariat Character: A Marxist Reading of Agni

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Abstract

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This article explores the Nepali epic *Agni* by Nawaraj Lamsal through its proletariat character, ‘Thule Kami’. Using Marxism as its theoretical framing, it analyzes how the existing Nepali society experiences class struggle and how economic power serves as a political power to suppress the powerless people. The article further presents how poverty-stricken people struggle for their livelihood against the socio-economic condition of Nepali society. It brings to light how the rulers and power mongers of society first use and later discard the lower-class people like *Thule Kami* to fulfill their vested interests. Drawn on the life of the protagonist, it reveals not only the poor economic conditions and exploitation faced by the proletariat but also their evolving consciousness of the need to protest.

Keywords: bourgeoisie, proletariat, haves and have-nots, class struggle

Introduction

Nawaraj Lamsal, a popular contemporary poet of Nepal, has continuously contributed to Nepali literary writing since 1992. He was awarded the Madan Prize for his epic, *Agni* in 2022, which is one of the most significant creations after the other two phenomenal epics *Karna* (2010) and *Dhara* (2017). Lamsal views that both *Karna* and *Dhara* uplift the marginalized people of our society. He presents how *Karna* is a great and capable character of Mahabharat who was suppressed by the state power. Similarly, Lamsal depicts the diversity and plurality of Nepali caste and ethnicity as well as geography in his epic *Dhara* (Nepal Live, 2023).

With regards to *Agni*, Lamsal's focus is on the Dalit community which is marginalized by the state itself. Lamsal makes their issue more explicit through this epic. The epic is based on a history that depicts when Prithvi Narayan Shah was unifying Gorkha, the time when there were 1100 households. As history informs us, instead of how to fight, the villagers asked to collect 1 rupee from each house. 1100 rupees were collected from the people's contribution. With that money, Prithvi Narayan Shah went to *Jasvir Kami's* 'Aaran' where he made swords, 'khukuri'. During the Nuwakot war in the Trishuli River, the army was not able to cross from Shubhghat. *Jalewa Majhi* cut wood and built a boat to cross the river. Lamsal as an author wondered, where are the children of *Bise Nagarchi*, *Jasvir Kami*, and *Jalewa Majhi* today? He wrote *Agni* because of the awareness that he should write about those marginalized people who fought for the state power (Nepal Live, 2023). Hence, *Agni* is famed for bringing the marginal voice of contemporary Nepali society to the center of the discourse.

The epic *Agni* has powerfully displayed the socio-cultural and economic history of Nepal. The main subject matter of this epic is the dream of making Jethi Tarbar, the name of swords by the king of Makawanpur, Hem Karna Sen. He wanted to be a powerful king therefore, the job of making, 'Jethi Tarbar' was given to 'Thule Kami'. Here, the king represents the upper -class and *Thule Kami* represents the lower-class people. Although *Thule Kami* has prepared the sharp and powerful sword with his hard labor, he is scolded, neglected, and humiliated in the end. Thus, he becomes the victim of the dominance of the upper class.

Though this epic has garnered a lot of interest among readers, there have not been any critical studies on this epic. Only a newspaper article by Poudel (2023) has highlighted the key features of this epic. In the article, he claims that *Agni* has brought many issues to the surface for social debate. The corrupt ruling system discriminated social system and the issues of untouchability highlight the multiple meanings of this epic. He points out that *Agni* is one of the significant creations of Lamsal which has brought the marginal voice to the center. This study aims to capitalize on this observation and fill the void by looking at this epic from a Marxist lens. The choice of this theoretical framing is driven by its content.

One of the crucial aspects of the epic is that it deals with the issues of poverty, discrimination, and “class struggle that emerges among the members of the working class since they sell their labors” (Asci, 2019, p. 33), and their growing protest which are the concerns of Marxism in which *Thule Kami* resembles the proletariat as discussed in the discourse of Marxism. He was successful in proving himself heroic by producing the powerful sword, Jethi Tarabar. The realities faced by the protagonist can be seen by relating it to Marxism which is “centered on the concept of ongoing class struggle between those who owned property-the bourgeoisie-and those who owned nothing but whose work produced wealth- proletariat” (Lohani et al.,1997, p.20). Therefore, this article is an attempt to explore how *Thule Kami* becomes the proletariat character in this epic. It examines how Thule Kami becomes the proletariat character in the epic. His character in a bourgeoisie society becomes explicit through a Marxist lens where “a large group of workers does the labor of production while a small group of owners reap the benefits and accumulate wealth” (Ryan, 2004, p.52). Therefore, this research can be significant because it examines the socioeconomic conditions of poor class people and at the same time it also helps to usher the marginal voice (Lamsal, 2022) into the mainstream discourse.

Method

This research is qualitative. The epic *Agni* is the primary data for this research. I have taken the dialogue and narration in the form of words, phrases, and sentences rather than numbers as a primary source of the data from the epic *Agni*. The secondary

data sources are some references such as books, journals, and articles as well as internet sources. As the epic is in Nepali, the lines quoted from the epic are my free translation.

Marxism is used as a theoretical framing to analyze this text. The epic depicts the presence of marginalized people and their history in our country. Marxist philosophy regards “the life of proletariat class depended on bourgeoisie class for employment” (Nurman et al., 2021, p. 47). The reason is that the proletariat have to work under the control of the bourgeoisie at a lower wage. In Marxism, “human events and productions focus on relationships among socio-economic class” (Tyson, 2006, p. 54). Here, the bourgeoisie always gains very high profit by exploiting the laborers. In this way, Marxism is centered on the struggle against injustice among the lower-class people for equality, justice, and freedom.

Marxism as a theoretical framework serves us to render the class struggle because the state is controlled by rich-class people who object to the freedom of the working class. Therefore, Marxism always “insists upon the issues of class relation, and class struggle” (Waugh, 2006, p.143) to establish a classless society. Contrary to this, working-class people are deprived of basic needs. The proletariat is known as the working-class people who are under the control and domination of high-class people because the life of the working class depends on the wages given by the bourgeoisie. *Agni* represents Nepali society where the gap between rich and poor people is very high. This is the serious concern of Marxism which is explored in this article.

Marxism is based on the relation of the economic factor. It is “a system of economic, social, political philosophy based on ideas that view social change in terms of economic factor” (Mirunalini & Devi, 2017, p. 13). Therefore, economic factors determine the socioeconomic and political condition of the society where working-class people are suppressed and dominated by a bourgeoisie lead government. It is now public knowledge that Marxism renders two social classes, the bourgeoisie and the proletariat. The proletariat is the laborers who are economically oppressed whereas the bourgeoisie is recognized as the upper-class people who are economically privileged. They enjoy a luxurious lifestyle, but lower-class people always suffer from the difficulty of economic crisis in their lives. Nurman et al. (2021) maintain that the proletariat as a working class

is always confronted or dominated by the bourgeoisie because their life depends on wages given by the bourgeoisie. Therefore, working-class people are used and thrown as objects by the bourgeoisie.

Discussion

Thule Kami and his 'Aaran'

The meaning of using Aaran as a means of earning reflects the economic condition of the working-class people in Nepal. Here, Aaran represents the traditional profession of the so-called untouchable people of Nepal who are waiting for their emancipation from all sorts of discrimination and prejudices that exist in our society. According to Marx, “emancipation of the proletariat must be the work of the proletariat itself” (Garland, 2022, P.1). Therefore, the story of *Agni* is significant in light of the Marxist lens.

Based on this lens, Thule represents the working-class people who work very hard in his Aaran, the place where blacksmith works for Iron weapons, for his livelihood. Lamsal (2022) depicts “*Thule* looks very old, lean and thin/His eyes deep down between his forehead and cheeks/slightly trembling his hands and his bare feet” (p.98). It is because of the poverty and his hard labor, physically he seems to be miserable. In a similar vein, the pitiable condition of lower-class people is reflected when Thule “wipes the sweat of his forehead with an old torn cap.” (Lamsal, 2022, p.20) This is how we observe the real picture of the socio-economic condition of the working-class people.

Agni is a story of so-called untouchable people like Thule Kami who made a great contribution to the formation and unification of Nepal but he is not identified and his history is not written. This aligns with the theoretical view of new historicist Foucault (1971) who argues that history is a form of knowledge and power. Therefore, working-class people are not identified and recognized in our society because they are economically poor and politically powerless in the state. In addition, *the* epic presents the poverty-stricken situation of the working-class people who have “yearly born the number of children lying a bit far on the floor helplessly” (Lamsal, 2022, p.62) The

image of the proletariat people and their family condition displays the real picture of poverty. Proletariat people are busy fulfilling their basic needs therefore they do not have the opportunity to think about the education and entertainment of their family. According to Haliv and Llnytskyi (2022), ruling classes have no interest in educating the working-class people and they do it for a reason of continuous domination and exploitation. Lamsal (2022) reveals a darker picture of this exploitation from his society, “children could not go to school because there is more hatred than education and they have to return home drinking the dishonor” (P.7).

Lower-class people become very poor because they do not have control over the means of production. Therefore, their living condition becomes very much miserable like that of *Thule*. Because of deprivation and poverty, working-class people are living a difficult life. Lamsal (2022) has shown the pitiable condition of *Thule* due to poverty:

Hunger, thirst, and lack/want
are the permanent friends of our life
like shadow
follow me wherever I go
come with me together (p.24).

The above extract reveals that working-class people like *Thule* are continuously facing the unalienable features of poverty till their last breath. Similarly, they neither have the value of their life nor do they have their own identity in the bourgeoisie society. They are suffering from, hunger, thirst, and lack because they are the permanent friends these are their identity and history. Lamsal has disclosed a real picture of poverty-stricken people through the life of *Thule*:

Why the life of Aaran is not shining like Khukuri
and Tarbar?
And why the path of poor people
does not fall under the mainstream of the state? (p.11).

The above extract presents how working-class people become the victims of poverty despite their hard work. Similarly, the state/ government is under the control of elite people, and working-class people are not respected. Rather they are marginalized in the

nation. The same idea is reflected in this line: “*Thule* is seen but they neglect the sweat and empty stomach of his” (Lamsal, 2022, p.100). In this way, the poor class people suffer a much more difficult life because of the ill-treatment of the bourgeoisie government. Here in this epic, *Thule Kami*, works in the Aaran being red, blue, and black, is a representative character of the Nepali working class who has suffered a lot due to the politico-cultural system of Nepal. Lamsal writes:

The road is blocked
 By the vehicles with flags
 Leaders are selling the book of their speeches
 Bridges are broken, before their completion
 But the state does not cry

In the difficulty of the poor citizens. Why? (p.11)

In this way, the socio-political condition of the society is against the proletariats’ interest because they are only used by political leaders for their benefit. This is how the condition of the working-class people like Thule becomes miserable and they are compelled to live amid poverty. Atri (2021) argues that “while the products are produced by the working class, the profit generated through its sale in the capitalist market goes to the bourgeoisie” (p. 157). In this light, *Agni* symbolizes the burning fire of the proletariat people against the exploitation by the bourgeoisie.

Exploitation and Domination

In *Agni*, Thule as a proletariat character suffers a lot due to the exploitation and domination of the king. Working-class people always become poor because of the exploitation and domination by the bourgeoisie society. The proletariat’s struggle against the bourgeoisie is due to the exploitation and lack of reasonable wages for the survival of the proletariat. “The exploitation of one social class by another is seen in modern industrial capitalism” (Barry, 2007, p.157). He works very hard. Being very old lean and thin, he falls into his own Aaran and vomits the blood. (Lamsal, 2022, p.199) In this way, he becomes the victim of poverty and exploitation.

Proletariats are the workers/laborers who work very hard in the factory for their life have no control over their production. The exploitation of *Thule* becomes visible

when has to become ready to make Jethi Tarbar despite being unwilling and uninterested. His disinterest and passivity followed by the compulsion reveals the unfair treatment of *Thule* who has to do the job of making Jethi Tarbar. This is reflected in an observation made by Dowding (2019), who argues that “exploitation is unfair treatment toward someone or group of people to benefit from their work because of their inferior position” (P. 232). This is how the poor class people become the victims of poverty and exploitation.

The suffering of *Thule* is revealed more poignantly in the following extract:

Thule hammers on
the strong iron which is as strong as his life,
but he is unaware that he is hammering on the iron
or the iron is hammering on his own life. (Lamsal, 2022, p. 90)

We find here the pathetic condition of a proletariat who is neglecting his own life to transform raw materials into commodities in the market. Despite being very old, *Thule* works very hard in his Aaran. Contrary to his expectations, he neither gets respect nor finds the proper wage from the king. He is exploited and humiliated and the poet makes it explicit in the following extract:

Why intellectual people are sold
And why do the buyers only become the rulers?

.....

Do not forget this
To be proud of a ruler
The melting of self-respect
The country would tolerate its destruction
Those who sell their country for their interest
They even sell their self-respect

for the sake of their vested interest in power politics. (p. 243)

The above extract reveals that in the bourgeoisie society, even intellectual people are sold for their vested interest so that they can start writing in favor of the bourgeoisie. In this way, the government is under the control of high-class people. In this regard, Aahuti (2021) links the emergence of the divide between rich and poor to the caste

system, as he notes, casteism is the basic thing for the emergence of rich and poor people in our society. *Thule Kami*, as depicted as an untouchable and exploited justifies his observation.

According to Giri (2013), the main objective of Marxism is to end all kinds of exploitation and inequalities and advocate for the establishment of equality, freedom, social justice, human dignity, and beauty. Marxism has a keen ear to observe how Bourgeoisies are powerful in suppressing the voice of the voiceless. To use that lens in this epic, we find how the proletariats are exploited and suppressed by the rulers. King, as a powerful ruler, becomes very angry with *Thule* because he has transformed a heavy raw of iron into two small and thin but long shining swords which the king might have thought to be large and heavy. King does not know the real power of the sword ‘Jethi Tarbar’ which is used to cut the heavy iron chains to save the elephants in the palace.

In a similar case, Lamsal discloses the real nature of the bourgeoisie because “Ruler /Power neither has ears nor eyes.” (Lamsal, 2022, p.106). Hence, the struggle is the need for the proletariats. *Agni* presents how the rulers are involved in the inhuman activities of exploitation against the working-class people. Therefore, as Tyson (2006) argues, “For Marxism, getting and keeping economic power is the motive behind all social and political activities” (p.53). This means that working-class people, who are forced to sell their labor, are bound to develop a sense of class consciousness and become unified to challenge the bourgeoisie conditioning of the economic system to establish the collective ownership of the means of production. Contrary to this, the main issue of the bourgeoisie is to own and control the means of production to achieve economic and political power. In *Agni*, the king represents the dominant ruler who has visited the ‘Aaran’ himself to make a powerful Sword although the Aaran was neglected and hated for ages due to casteism which is deeply rooted in our society.

King has come himself
 near the Aaran
 for the first time near the Aaran
 and burned the silver Hukka,
 using the fire from the same Aaran (Lamsal, 2022, p.91).

Although proletariats worked hard for the raw materials for their production, the King visited the Aran only to fulfill his interest and economically exploit them. Economically poor class people are doomed to suffer a lot for the sake of their lives. Here, 'Aaran' symbolically represents the life of proletariats which is burning as a fire due to deprivation, poverty, and exploitation. Contrary to this, aristocratic people revolve around prosperity and happiness. Therefore, Aaran is waiting for the freedom and rights of the proletariat.

The proletariat, like *Thule*, is suppressed and humiliated by the king, who is powerful in everything to dominate the poor. "The proletarian class is only regarded as a class that is always oppressed" (Nurman & Kuncara, 2023, P.1197).

But nobody knows

Where the Thule kami had gone

And where are the other workers?

.....

Where had Thule Kami gone?

Who was searched in a high majestic way?

Disappeared silently

Why he is not valued today

For the king who smoked Hukka at the Aaran (Lamsal, 2022, p.113).

Very little wage is given to the proletariat in the bourgeoisie society. Although *Thule* has been searched in a majestic way to fulfill the dream of making the Jethi Tarbar in the palace, he disappears after the humiliation and scolding from the king in the end. Poor people like *Thule* are always used and exploited in the bourgeoisie society. The symbolic disappearance of him is indicative of the hidden fire burning within the society. The epic metaphorically represents the internal burning and rage of *Thule Kami* against the bourgeoisie mentality of exploitation of the working-class people.

Evolving consciousness and Protest of the oppressed

Agni represents the voice of the working-class people who work for their livelihood tolerating the hatred and discrimination. *Thule Kami* as a proletariat character becomes the victim of exploitation of the King who has given the work of making Jethi

Tarbar. Lamsal (2022) views that it is the story of an honest person who becomes the victim of poverty and racial discrimination. His protagonist *Thule Kami* “struggles against society but is bound to live for the society” (p. 12). In this regard, *Thule Kami*’s protest is against the socio-cultural situation of Nepali society where people are judged based on their caste.

The economic aspect of society is significant in Marxism. *Agni* presents a realistic picture of Nepali society where we can notice a wider gap between the rich class and poor class people.

Thule Kami, the proletariat, does not have ownership of the means of production. They only can sell their labor power at a low salary for their survival. In this regard, Tyson (2006) states,

“For the real battle lines are drawn, to put the matter simply, between the “haves” and the “have nots”, between the bourgeoisie-those who control the world’s natural, economic and human resources- and the proletariat.....have always performed the manual labor- the mining, the factory work, the ditch digging” (p.50).

Here, “haves” refer to the bourgeoisie who are the masters and control the means of production, and the proletariats. Similarly, “Have nots” refers to the proletariats like *Thule* whose economic condition is very poor and who works hard in his ‘Aaran’. *Thule* shows his rebellious nature and struggles against exploitation and domination when the king humiliates him. He feels as if his blood becomes very hot and feels nauseous when he comes into tension (Lamsal, 2022, p.104). This tension is reflected in the struggle of working-class people like *Thule*.

Labor is there, but life is not labor-friendly

Citizens are there, but the state is not citizen-friendly

The king doesn’t seem to be a guardian,

The state is there, but it is not for citizens (P.94).

In the socio-cultural situation of our society, laborers are severely exploited and humiliated as in this epic. Here, the king represents the ruling elite who exploits the citizens like *Thule Kami*. He could not become a kind and labor-friendly guardian as he

represents the state governed by the bourgeoisie. In this context, the proletariats' struggle involves their demand to change their life, especially the improvement of the economic situation. However, it is difficult to attain the laborers because of the dominating position of the bourgeoisie in political power. Therefore, class- struggle, one of the most significant issues in Marxism, emerged among the working-class people when they started selling their labor (Mirunalini & Devi, 2017, p.13), and the protest was engraved in that.

In addition, *Agni* preserves the voice of the voiceless which can be taken as a crucial part of the evolving consciousness of the working class people. As the epic shows, *Thule Kami* “feels and observes that the hot blood is flowing in his sweat” (Lamsal, 2022, p.10). He is a strong, determined, and rebellious character who becomes very happy and hopeful in displaying his great achievement of making ‘Jethi Tarbar’ in front of the king.

Nobody comes to your door to beg for the remaining food of yours
 Now each poor can live either by selling her/his sweat
 Or with the flame of rebellion, do you know
 one day, s/he will burn herself/himself and burn his society? (Lamsal,2022,
 p.16)

The excerpt above shows that the proletariats like *Thule* struggle for equality and freedom against the exploitation and domination of the working-class people. Because of the growing awareness of the condition of the proletariat, they have developed a feeling of self-respect. Whenever they could not tolerate the strong hatred and domination upon them, they could burn down such types of division and discrimination among the people through their unity and struggle and “the structure of the society through the lens of its various classes and struggles between them” (Atri, 2021, P.154). The real picture of the class division of our society and the emerging consciousness therein is reflected in the following extract:

Dominator is also here
 Dominated is also here
 The person who causes pain is also here

The person who gets pain is here
 But both the pained and dominated/exploited do not know
 Why do they become exploited? (Lamsal, 2022, p.183)

This is how the awareness of class division emerges which serves as the driving force for the class struggle in the society.

The proletariat are universal characters who are suppressed and dominated because they cannot have control over the means of production, They have to depend on the wages given by the bourgeoisie. Therefore, the working-class people and their voices are not heard but suppressed. This is the reason that they are in a condition to struggle against any kind of exploitation and domination and for the establishment of social justice. This is reflected in the extract below:

I could not see the room of the university's respectable
 Not only one or two
 A greater portion of the society and social structure
 I saw them against the respect of humanity
 It is dying the inner respect of reading
 And growing the rebel and no continuity in reading (Lamsal, 2022, p.131).

The epic also shows that lower-class people are suppressed and discriminated against even in the university. There is no respectable environment for learning. This indicates that the bourgeoisie government refuses to show sympathy and humanity towards the pain and predicament of the lower-class people in all spheres of life. In this context, the growing consciousness of the proletariat revealed in the epic is significant. This class consciousness is one of the most important subject matters in Marxism where the common interest of the proletariat leads to collective political action to bring about social change. The poet symbolically presents the 'Badal' and 'kuhiro' to display the rebellious nature of the proletariat due to their severe exploitation of them. Therefore, the feelings of revolution seem to emerge in the new generation. *Thule Kami* has taught an important lesson to the king not to underestimate the power of labor because the King realizes his mistake when 'Jethi Tarbar' is used to save the elephants. Therefore,

he orders his workmen to bring *Thule* again to the palace. In this context, Lamsal (2022) depicts the strong protest of the proletariat people thus,

Before the return of the army
 The elder Son of Thule said:
 Before the death of my father
 Do not go to the palace at any cost

Die being hungry but don't expect anything from the palace (p. 203).

The protest of the villagers is explored through the strong hatred towards the bourgeoisie. In this way, villagers protest against the despotic ruler who has used the poor like *Thule* and left him alone without any respect for him as a human. Therefore, the workers' evolving consciousness is important for their rebellion. As Baring (2023) argues, "For the majority of Marxists in the early twentieth century, the royal road to revolution led through the enlightenment of the working class" (p.1). The following extract depicts a higher level of consciousness and protest of the proletariat against the bourgeoisie mentality of the exploiter, the King:

I believe in you, poet!
 Really due to the high consciousness
 The burning of this Aran
 Every page was written against the Aran
 Will burn in this place
 And then it will write,
 The story of this Aran

New story and writing of the new world (Lamsal, 2022, P. 127).

The revolt of the working-class people is explicit in this extract. When the working-class people are oppressed and discriminated against in society, a sense of revolt emerges among them due to their consciousness against all sorts of prejudice and injustice. Therefore, the proletariat like *Thule* could burn down all sorts of discrimination in the same burning fire of the Aran for the establishment of a classless society. The working-class people remain conscious of the need for struggle for equality, and justice in every sector of life.

Conclusion

This article has examined the class struggle between the bourgeoisie and proletariat in the epic *Agni*. The differences between the bourgeoisie and proletariat create the class conflict that appears in this epic. The study has used Marxism as a theoretical framing to explore the issues of class struggle, exploitation, domination, and protest of the proletariat class as depicted in the epic. It has examined *Thule Kami* as a proletariat character representing the Nepali society where working-class people struggle a lot for their livelihood. From such a society, it has explored the marginal voice of the so-called untouchable character like *Thule Kami* who becomes the victim of a corrupt and discriminated social system of Nepal. Hence, the significant findings of this study include the burning fire spirit of *Thule Kami*'s 'Aaran', the deep-rooted exploitation of the proletariat, and the growing consciousness and protest of the oppressed.

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Conflict of Interest

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