

Research Article

Socio-cultural Reflections on Gemstones: A Bourdieusian Analysis of Śūdraka's *Mṛcchakaṭikā*

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Abstract: This paper applies Pierre Bourdieu's sociological framework, particularly his concepts of capital, habitus, and field, to analyse the gemstone casket in Śūdraka's classical Sanskrit drama *Mṛcchakaṭikā* (*The Little Clay Cart*). It argues that the gemstones function as a primary social token whose value is not inherent but continuously produced and redefined through their circulation within the play's stratified social world. The study traces how the casket operates as symbolic capital for the courtesan Vasantasenā, who entrusts it to the impoverished Brahmin merchant Cārudatta; as economic capital for the thief Śarvilaka, who steals it to secure his beloved's freedom; and as political capital for the antagonist Saṁsthānaka, who weaponises it within the judicial field to destroy his rival. The paper demonstrates that the central conflict arises from a clash of habitus, the deeply internalised dispositions of the characters, which generate incompatible interpretations of the gemstone's meaning. The competing definitions are forcefully contested in the field of crisis, which emerges during the trial scene of climax. are forcefully contested. Ultimately, to understand the processes of conversion, contestation, and reproduction of social value within the drama's complex network of power relations, this Bourdieusian reading reveals the gem-casket not merely as a narrative device but as a critical analytical tool.

Keywords: Capital; Field; Gemstones; Habitus; *Mṛcchakaṭikā*

Introduction

Gemstones, though physically small and inert, often possess immense symbolic and social power in literary worlds, shaping emotions, destiny, social relations, and moral conflict. In Śūdraka's *Mrcchakaṭikā*, the casket of gemstones and ornaments, scientifically lifeless, drives the entire plot, determining the fate of the protagonists Vasantasenā and Cārudatta, as well as that of the antagonist Saṃsthānaka. Its movement enables love and trust, provokes theft and jealousy, facilitates liberation, sustains injustice, and indirectly contributes to a political revolution that overturns a kingdom. The title *Mrcchakaṭikā* ("The Little Clay Cart") is deeply ironic, as it foregrounds Rohasena's toy, an object of negligible material worth, in sharp contrast to the gemstone casket, whose immense social and economic weight governs the course of events.

Written by the king-poet Śūdraka, *Mrcchakaṭikā* is a unique *Prakarāṇa* (Bhat 1952, 1) that departs from the mythological focus typical of its time. Instead, it presents a realistic portrayal of the stratified urban society of Ujjayinī, the capital of Avanti. The play depicts a diverse social world that includes the wealthy and cultured courtesan Vasantasenā, the virtuous but impoverished Brahmin merchant Cārudatta, the corrupt and powerful Saṃsthānaka, and the rebellious herdsman Āryaka. This social range reflects a society where profession does not strictly align with caste; a Brahmin may be a merchant or even a thief, suggesting a flexible, if uneasy, social order. Such complexity makes the play an apt site for analysing power, value, and class, where individual interactions mirror broader social structures. Beyond its role as a mere plot mechanism, the gemstone casket emerges throughout the drama as a potent social token. This object carries, transmits, and transforms social meaning within a specific cultural setting. Its significance lies not in its material worth but in what it represents within shifting social relations. The meaning of the casket is fluid rather than fixed, changing according to its possessor, their social position, their intentions, and the specific social field in which it appears.

While existing scholarship has examined *Mrcchakaṭikā* from perspectives such as dramatic technique (Konar), narrative style (Mastud), stage adaptation (Khoroché), socio-cultural setting (Ahad), socio-political concerns (Singh), and gender (Limaye and Price), moreover, on the themes of love, fate and virtue, nevertheless, there appears to be very few research papers beyond a literal interpretation of the narrative and to examine the invisible social forces, the theoretical framework of Bourdieu is uniquely suited. Bourdieu's theoretical framework, with its emphasis on capital, habitus, and field, offers a productive approach to this gap. This paper first examines the gemstone casket as convertible capital, then analyses how characters' habitus governs their engagement with it, and finally explores the trial scene as a critical field where its meaning is contested and restored.

The Bourdieusian Framework

Pierre Bourdieu's work offers a lens for examining the often invisible rules and structures that govern social life, moving beyond simplistic economic explanations

toward a more nuanced understanding of power. For Bourdieu, capital is not merely economic. money and material wealth, but it is the sum of all resources, both tangible and intangible, that confers power and status within a specific social arena. Capital exists in several principal forms, such as economic, social, cultural, and symbolic capital, and among these, economic capital is the most straightforward. The gemstone casket is, at its base, a concentration of economic capital. Social capital refers to the resources based on group membership, relationships, networks of influence and support, and it is constituted by who you know and who is obligated to you. Cultural capital encompasses knowledge, skills, education, and other cultural acquisitions, and it can be embodied in one's mannerisms and accent, objectified in books and arts, or institutionalised in academic qualifications. Another form of symbolic capital is the most abstract yet crucial, comprising the prestige, honour, reputation, and legitimacy that an individual or institution possesses. It is the form that other types of capital take once they are perceived as legitimate and recognised. The dynamism of social life lies in the constant struggle to convert one form of capital into another, for instance, economic capital can be converted into cultural capital by paying an elite education, which in turn can be converted into social capital through networking, and finally into symbolic capital like honour and respect, and the gemstone casket in this play is the physical embodiment of this convertibility.

Habitus is Bourdieu's term for the system of durable, transposable dispositions that individuals acquire through their lifelong socialisation within a particular social position. It is the "feel for the game," a set of ingrained habits, skills, and tendencies that guide how one perceives, appreciates, and acts in the social world. Habitus is "history turned into nature," which is structured by one's past experiences, like class, education, and upbringing, and, in turn, structures one's future practices. A person's habitus operates largely below the level of conscious calculation and explains why individuals from similar backgrounds often share tastes, aspirations, and instinctive reactions. In the play *Mṛcchakaṭikā*, the characters' actions are not random; their distinct habitus generates them. Cārudatta's unwavering honesty, even in poverty; Vasantasenā's strategic management of her social constraints; Saṁsthānaka's brutish entitlement—all are products of their deeply embedded dispositions.

A field is a structured social space with its own specific rules and power relations, such as a competitive game or an arena: the field of politics, the field of art, the field of law, or the field of academia. In such a field, individuals and institutions struggle to accumulate and monopolise the specific forms of capital that are valued there. The primary field in the drama is the social world of ancient Ujjayani. Within this, there are several sub-fields: the intimate field of love and personal relations, the field of the king's court, the field of the marketplace, and the field of the law court, each having its own rules and hierarchies. The gemstones' casket moves through these various fields, and its value and meaning shift dramatically depending on which field it enters. Together, capital, habitus, and field form an interdependent triad in which the field structures the game, the different forms of capital are what is struggled for, and the habitus is the internalised "feel" that guides the players' strategies. Applying this

framework to *Mṛcchakatikā*, the paper examines the play not merely as a romantic drama but as a complex sociological tableau in which the circulation of gemstones meticulously maps the struggles that constitute its social world.

Conversion of Capital and the Clash of Habitus

The movement of the gemstone casket across the narrative provides a concrete illustration of Bourdieu's theory of capital conversion, demonstrating that value is socially produced rather than inherent in the object itself. At each stage of its circulation, the casket functions as a site where social, symbolic, and economic capital intersect, determining the fate of those who come into contact with it. The play opens with the courtesan Vasantasenā, whose symbolic capital is unstable due to her profession, despite her immense economic and cultural capital. She deliberately entrusts the gemstone casket to Cārudatta as a strategic move, thereby initiating a conversion of economic capital into social and symbolic capital. By allowing her to associate herself with a man whose moral reputation and lineage confer social legitimacy, the casket becomes a token of trust and emotional commitment. For Vasantasenā, the gemstones are valuable not for their monetary worth but for their capacity to generate affection, trust, recognition, and symbolic validation that wealth alone cannot secure.

The casket encounters a radically different logic after entering the premises of Cārudatta; Despite being economically and financially exhausted, Cārudatta's symbolic capital, his values, generosity, honour, and reputation, remain intact and deeply cherished. Within his domestic space, the gemstones, as concentrated economic capital, become a dangerous liability. Shaped by moral integrity and honourable poverty, his habitus prevents him from either refusing the responsibility or recognising the risks involved in safeguarding such wealth. The stealth of the casket thus triggers not merely a material loss but a crisis of identity, threatening the symbolic capital upon which his social existence depends. His response to this crisis, sending his wife's pearl necklace, an object embodying both familial honour and economic value, to Vasantasenā, without any second thought, further illustrates the logic of habitus-driven action. This act of sacrificing remaining domestic symbolic capital to restore trust and moral standing constitutes a reverse conversion of capital. His reflexive action is not a calculated economic decision but rather a response generated by his deeply ingrained disposition, thereby reaffirming Bourdieu's insight that social strategies often operate beneath conscious calculation.

The engagement of the gem casket with Śarvilaka presents a stark contrast, in which his habitus, shaped by romantic commitment and material necessity, strips the object of all symbolic associations. For him, the casket is a means of purchasing Madanikā's freedom, representing pure economic capital and converting illicit wealth into the socially legitimate capital of marriage. Revealing the gemstone's raw monetary value once detached from moral and emotional frameworks, his theft is therefore a direct and functional transaction. In turn, the casket is approached by Saṃsthānaka, whose habitus is defined by entitlement, coercion, and power. His desire to dominate Vasantasenā and his initial desire to possess the gemstones are inseparable, as is evident

in his later actions. He manipulates the casket as false evidence in court, representing a more insidious conversion: transforming material wealth into political and symbolic capital capable of destroying a rival. His actions also demonstrate how capital, when backed by institutional power, can be violently redefined within a corrupted field.

Gender, Material Culture, and the Agency

The circulation of the gemstone casket also exposes the gendered conditions under which capital operates in *Mrcchakaṭikā*. Despite wealth and refinement, the exclusion from normative forms of symbolic legitimacy shapes Vasantasenā's strategies. How women positioned outside domestic respectability must negotiate recognition through indirect and symbolic means is revealed by her engagement with material objects. Vasantasenā converts economic capital into moral association by entrusting the gemstones to Cārudatta. This act reflects a gendered moral economy in which material wealth must be transformed into affection, trust, and sacrifice to gain social acceptance. Her habitus enables her to recognise that symbolic legitimacy cannot be claimed openly but must be mediated through socially sanctioned relationships.

The moral coding of material culture is further reinforced by the contrast between the gemstone casket and Cārudatta's wife's pearl necklace: the casket signifies mobility, exchange, and risk, while the necklace represents inherited domestic virtue and familial honour. When the necklace is sent to Vasantasenā, domestic symbolic capital is temporarily mobilised to protect male honour, thereby undermining the view that women's material possessions function as extensions of family reputation rather than as autonomous property. These exchanges reveal that jewellery in the play is never neutral, and that gender, social position, and the field in which it circulates shape its value. Material culture thus becomes a medium through which characters reinforce, contest, and reconfigure moral hierarchies.

Although the characters act with intention, individual control is repeatedly exceeded by the gemstone casket's movement, highlighting the limits of agency within structured social fields. The object's meaning is sought to be stabilised by each character, but shifting contexts and power relations continually redefine its value. On the one hand, the female protagonist initiates the circulation but cannot predict its consequences; on the other hand, Cārudatta's moral integrity renders him more vulnerable than protected. The pragmatic clarity of Šarvilaka remains dependent on the authority of Vasantasenā's and even Saṁsthānaka's political power, which proves insufficient once the field itself shifts. These outcomes support Bourdieu's ideas that capital is never fully possessed; it is always subject to recognition, misrecognition, and redefinition. Therefore, the gemstone casket becomes a mobile site where agency and structure converge, and its instability highlights the fragility of symbolic capital and the precarious nature of social value, especially in contexts of unequal power distribution.

The Trial: Gemstones in the Field of Crisis

The climax of the play, the trial of Cārudatta, constitutes a critical and highly structured field, the judicial field or the field of law. The field has its own formal rules, procedures, and hierarchies, including those governing judges, witnesses, and

evidence. It is here that the gemstone undergoes its most radical and dangerous transformation of meaning. In the intimate field of love between Cārudatta and Vasantasenā, gemstones function as a medium for the conversion of positive capital, governed by emotional investment and symbolic value. In the field of theft, it was reduced to a simple economic commodity. Now in the judicial field, it is brutally reconstructed by Saṃsthānaka as conclusive evidence of theft and murder. Saṃsthānaka, leveraging his immense political capital as the king's brother-in-law, successfully manipulates the rules of this field and uses his social position to impose his definition of the situation. The gem casket, once the symbol of Vasantasenā's trust in Cārudatta, now becomes the evidence of his criminality and moral corruption. The field of law, which is purportedly a space for discovering truth, turns into a place for its fabrication, and the jurist, bound by procedure and likely intimidated by Saṃsthānaka's power, becomes complicit in this perversion; demonstrating how a field can be structured to serve the interests of the powerful, they validate his narrative. The gemstone becomes a field-variable token whose meaning is entirely dependent on the power dynamics of the arena it occupies. Only when Vasantasenā herself enters the judicial field does the trial reach its resolution; her unexpected appearance is a dramatic interruption that shatters Saṃsthānaka's constructed reality. Restoring the gemstones' original, actual meaning as tokens of trust and gifts of love, her testimony performs a powerful act of re-conversion. In an instant, the casket, which had previously been evidence of Cārudatta's guilt, becomes evidence of his innocence and the cruelty of Saṃsthānaka. The moment highlights a crucial point that while fields are structured by power, they are not immune to disruption. The false capital that Saṃsthānaka had invested in the object is overwhelmed by the return of the legitimate owner of the symbolic meaning, Vasantasenā, with her authentic testimony. In this case, truth, supported by the powerful symbolic capital of the victimised heroine, can drive the field, if only momentarily.

The events of the trial, including the exposure of Saṃsthānaka's crime and the corruption of the court, do not end in a vacuum; instead, they coincide with the political revolution led by Āryaka. This is not just a coincidence in the plot; it signifies a fundamental transformation of the entire social field of Ujjayani. The old order, entrenched by corrupt power figures such as Saṃsthānaka and his brother-in-law, the king, is overthrown, and justice is immediately served by the new king, Āryaka, who rewards Cārudatta and Vasantasenā and, presumably, punishes the villain. This political upheaval represents a restructuring of the entire social game, in which the rules have changed: the forms of capital that were dominant under the old regime, Saṃsthānaka's brute political power, are devalued. In contrast, the forms that were vulnerable but virtuous, like Cārudatta's symbolic capital, are now recognised and honoured. Therefore, the journey of the gemstone casket not only maps the struggles within the old field but also catalyses the conditions that lead to its transformation and the establishment of a new, more equitable social order.

Conclusion

In *Mrcchakatikā*, the gemstone casket functions as more than a narrative catalyst; it serves as the key analytical lens through which the drama's exploration of social value, power, and morality can be understood. The play vividly enacts Pierre Bourdieu's concepts of capital, habitus, and field through its circulation, demonstrating how social worth is produced via constant struggle, negotiation, and recognition rather than being fixed and intrinsic. The casket's journey reveals the unstable nature of the capital itself. At the same time, symbolic capital is valuable only so long as the public recognises it; economic wealth changes in value as it is transformed into social and symbolic forms. Despite her wealth and cultural sophistication, Vasantasenā uses gemstones to negotiate legitimacy in a society that denies her access to honour. Cārudatta regards them as a harsh test of an honour-bound habitus that prioritises moral integrity over survival. For Saṁsthānaka, the same object becomes a weapon wielded by power to secure dominance and impose false meaning. In contrast, for Śarvilaka, it is reduced to a useful tool of economic exchange. These conflicting interpretations collide most violently during the judicial trial. The vulnerability of ethical value in the absence of institutional support is exposed in this field, where truth is not discovered but authorised. However, Vasantasenā's intervention shows that symbolic capital can upend even the most corrupt fields when grounded in recognition and authenticity. Her testimony gives the gemstones new significance and reaffirms morality and trust in the face of oppressive authority. The coincidence that the trial occurs at the same time as Āryaka's political rebellion underscores how closely the struggle for the gemstone is linked to a broader shift in social structure. With the overthrow of the old regime, honour is once again valued as a legitimate form of capital. In this way, the gemstone casket helps to reconfigure the social field while also mapping its contradictions. Ultimately, *Mrcchakatikā* emerges as a deeply sociological drama. This study shows that social reality is shaped by conflicts over the meanings ascribed to objects, rather than by the objects themselves. This realisation, that honour, justice, and recognition are never assured and must constantly be negotiated within shifting fields of power, is what gives the play its enduring relevance.

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