Global Capitalism, Gender Norms, and Resistance: A Marxist Perspective on *Talking of Muskaan*

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the intersections of globalization, gender, and class through a Marxist framework in HimanjaliSankar's Talking of Muskaan. Set against the backdrop of modern Indian society, the novel explores the struggles of a queer protagonist, Muskaan, as she grapples with societal expectations, gender norms, and capitalist structures that marginalize non-conforming identities. Through a critical analysis of the narrative, this article argues that globalization, while often seen as a force for progress, perpetuates patriarchal and capitalist ideologies that reinforce traditional gender roles and exacerbate social inequalities. By situating Muskaan's experiences within the broader context of global capitalism, the article highlights how gender and class oppression are intertwined, with the commodification of queer identities emerging as a key theme. This Marxist reading reveals how the novel critiques both local and global systems of power, while advocating for resistance against the capitalist and patriarchal forces that regulate gender and sexuality in a globalized world.

Keywords: Globalization, Gender, Marxism, Capitalism, Class Struggle, Queer Identity, Patriarchy, Commodification, Intersectionality, Social Inequality, Heteronormativity, Resistance, Modern Indian Society, Non-conforming Identities

Marxism and queer theory are two distinct but intersecting frameworks that critique power structures, social inequalities, and norms. Marxism focuses on class struggles and the exploitation inherent in capitalist systems, while queer theory challenges fixed categories of gender and sexuality, focusing on how heteronormativity and binary identities are socially constructed. When combined, they offer a unique lens to examine how capitalism and class intersect with gender and sexual identities, exploring how heteronormativity supports capitalist exploitation and how queerness resists capitalist norms.

Marxism centers on the critique of capitalism, emphasizing that social relations are rooted in economic structures. Marx argued that society is divided into two main classes: the bourgeoisie, who control the means of production, and the proletariat, whose labor is exploited. Marxism seeks to overthrow capitalism and create a classless, socialist society where resources are shared equitably. The focus on economic relations, however, has traditionally been seen as limited in addressing other forms of oppression, such as those based on gender and sexuality.

Marxist theory, as developed by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, focuses primarily on the economic relations of production and class struggle. In early Marxist texts like The Communist Manifesto (1848), little attention was paid to issues of gender and sexuality. Engels, however, addressed the role of the family in perpetuating capitalism in The Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State (1884). Engels argued that the oppression of women began with the advent of private property and class society, linking patriarchy to capitalism.

Marxist feminism emerged in the 20th century to critique both capitalism and patriarchy. Scholars such as Silvia Federici in Caliban and the Witch (2004) argued that capitalism relied on the exploitation of women's reproductive labor, which is essential to the capitalist economy yet devalued. Federici's work, along with others like Nancy Fraser and MariarosaDalla Costa, underscored the idea that capitalism benefits from the unpaid labor of women in the domestic sphere, reinforcing gender roles that are instrumental in maintaining the capitalist order.

Queer theory emerged in the late 20th century, heavily influenced by Michel Foucault's The History of Sexuality (1976), which critiqued how modern societies regulate and categorize sexual behavior. Foucault argued that sexuality is not a natural or fixed category but is shaped by social, political, and economic forces. This idea of sexuality as socially constructed was further developed by theorists such as Judith Butler in Gender Trouble (1990), where she introduced the concept of gender performativity. Butler argued that gender is not a stable identity but a series of actions that conform to societal norms, and she critiqued the binary understanding of gender and sexuality. Rosemary Hennessy, in Profit and Pleasure: Sexual Identities in Late Capitalism (2000), further explored how capitalism commodifies sexuality, particularly in neoliberal economies. Hennessy argued that while queer identities may be celebrated in

mainstream culture (through "pink capitalism" or LGBTQ+ marketing), this does not lead to substantive liberation. Instead, queer identities are turned into consumer categories, depoliticizing the radical potential of queer movements.

This aligns with the Marxist critique of how capitalism co-opts marginalized identities for profit.

The commodification of queerness is a central theme in the intersection of Marxism and queer theory. Lisa Duggan, in The Twilight of Equality? Neoliberalism, Cultural Politics, and the Attack on Democracy (2003), discusses how neoliberal capitalism has absorbed LGBTQ+ identities into the market, turning queerness into a lifestyle brand rather than a revolutionary movement. Duggan coined the term "homonormativity" to describe how capitalism privileges certain queer identities (often affluent, white, and cisgender) while marginalizing others, especially working-class or non-white queer people.

The focus on commodification has led scholars like JasbirPuar to critique how capitalism creates hierarchies even within queer communities. In Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times (2007), Puar critiques how queer identities are integrated into nationalist and capitalist agendas, particularly in the context of U.S. imperialism and neoliberal globalization.

However, the integration of Marxism and queer theory also reveals opportunities for resistance. Queer identities can destabilize capitalist norms, especially when they refuse to conform to heteronormative, family-oriented structures that capitalism relies on. By bridging the materialist focus of Marxism with the cultural critiques of queer theory, scholars argue for a revolutionary approach that seeks both economic and sexual liberation.

Gender is a multifaceted concept deeply ingrained in human societies, encompassing roles, behaviors, identities, and expectations associated with masculinity and femininity. The term has been widely explored across various academic disciplines, including sociology, psychology, anthropology, and gender studies.

In sociology, gender is often analyzed through the lens of social constructionism, which posits that gender roles and identities are socially constructed rather than biologically determined. This perspective emphasizes the ways in which societal norms, values, and institutions shape individuals' understanding and performance of gender. For example, the work of sociologist Judith Butler has been instrumental in challenging binary understandings of gender, arguing that it is performative and enacted through repeated behaviors rather than being an inherent trait (Butler, 1990). Judith Butler argues this in Undoing Gender (Butler, 2004) as 'If gender is a kind of doing, an incessant activity performed, in part, without one's knowing and without one's willing, it is not for that reason automatic or mechanical (Butler, 1990). On the contrary, it is a practice of improvisation within a scene of constraint. Moreover, one does not "do" one's gender alone. One is always "doing" with or for another, even if the other is only imaginary. What I call my "own" gender appears perhaps at times as something that I author or, indeed, own. But the terms that make up one's own gender are, from the start, outside oneself, beyond oneself in a sociality that has no single author (and that radially contests the notion of authorship itself).

Psychological research delves into individual experiences of gender, exploring how individuals develop a sense of their own gender identity and how this identity interacts with other aspects of their identity, such as race, class, and sexuality. Psychologists have also investigated the impacts of gender socialization on cognitive development, interpersonal relationships, and mental health outcomes.

India's religious traditions, including Hinduism, Islam, Sikhism, Buddhism, and others, have played a significant role in shaping gender norms and practices. While these traditions offer diverse perspectives on gender, they have often been interpreted in ways that reinforce hierarchical gender relations, with men occupying positions of power and women relegated to subordinate roles. However, religious texts and practices also contain elements that challenge traditional gender roles and advocate for gender equality and justice.

The caste system, another important aspect of Indian society, intersects with gender in complex ways, influencing individuals' opportunities and experiences based on their caste and gender identities. Historically, women from marginalized caste backgrounds have faced intersecting forms of discrimination and oppression, compounding the challenges they face in asserting their rights and agency.

HimanjaliSankar is a distinguished author in the realm of Indian young adult fiction (Sankar, 2014). Her work is characterized by a profound understanding of the adolescent psyche, which she deftly weaves into narratives that resonate with young readers (Meyer, 2003). Sankar's contributions to this genre are not only significant in terms of literary quality but also in their thematic depth, addressing complex issues faced by teenagers in contemporary India (Sankar, 2014).

Sankar's storytelling often delves into themes of identity, mental health, and social challenges, making her works both relevant and relatable to young adults. One of her most acclaimed novels, "Talking of Muskaan," explores the sensitive and often stigmatized topic of sexuality and the impact of bullying. This book stands out for its empathetic portrayal of a young girl grappling with her sexual identity and the societal pressures that come with it. It has been praised for its honest and fearless narrative, encouraging conversations about acceptance and mental well-being among young readers and their families (Sankar, 2014).

Another notable work, "The Lies We Tell," further cements Sankar's reputation as a writer who does not shy away from difficult topics (Sankar, 2014). This novel examines the repercussions of a teenager's suicide attempt on her family and friends, offering a nuanced exploration of mental health issues. Through this book, Sankar highlights the importance of communication and support systems for young adults dealing with emotional and psychological challenges (Sankar, 2014).

Sankar's ability to craft compelling characters and gripping plots ensures that her books are not only educational but also engaging. Her writing style is accessible yet profound, making her stories appealing to both young readers and adults (Sankar, 2014). By addressing real-life issues with sensitivity and insight, she provides a mirror to the lives of her readers, helping them to navigate their own experiences.

In addition to her novels, Sankar has contributed to the genre through her involvement in various literary platforms and events aimed at promoting young adult literature in India. She has been an advocate for more diverse and inclusive stories within this genre, recognizing the need for representation of different voices and experiences (Sankar, 2014).

Through her body of work, HimanjaliSankar has significantly enriched Indian young adult fiction, offering stories that are not only entertaining but also thought-provoking. Her contributions continue to inspire both readers and fellow writers, making her a pivotal figure in the landscape of contemporary Indian literature for young adults (Sankar, 2014).

"Talking of Muskaan" is one of HimanjaliSankar's most impactful contributions to Indian young adult fiction published in 2014, the novel is a poignant exploration of the complexities surrounding teenage life, focusing on themes of identity, bullying, and societal expectations (Sankar, 2014). The story is centered around Muskaan, a young girl whose life takes a drastic turn when she becomes the target of bullying due to her sexual orientation.

The novel begins with Muskaan's suicide attempt, a stark and powerful opening that sets the stage for a deep dive into the circumstances that led to this tragic moment. Sankar uses a multi-narrative structure to unfold the story, allowing different characters—Muskaan's friends, classmates, and family members—to offer their perspectives. This approach provides a comprehensive view of the impact of bullying and societal prejudices on a young individual's mental health (Sankar, 2014).

Sankar's portrayal of Muskaan is both empathetic and realistic. She captures the inner turmoil of a teenager struggling with her identity in a society that is often unaccepting of differences (Sankar, 2014). Through Muskaan's journey, Sankar addresses critical issues such as the lack of support systems for LGBTQ+ youth, the pervasiveness of school bullying, and the psychological trauma that can result from such experiences (Sankar, 2014).

One of the strengths of "Talking of Muskaan" is its ability to generate empathy and understanding among readers. Sankar does not present her characters in black-and-white terms; instead, she paints them in shades of gray, emphasizing that everyone has their own struggles and perspectives (Sankar, 2014). This nuanced character development helps readers to see the humanity in each individual, fostering a deeper connection with the story.

The novel also serves as a critique of the education system and societal norms that often fail to protect vulnerable individuals. Through the experiences of Muskaan and her peers Sankar highlights the urgent need for more inclusive and supportive environments in schools. Her storytelling encourages young readers to reflect on their own attitudes and behaviors, promoting a culture of empathy and acceptance (Sankar, 2014).

In Talking of Muskaan, HimanjaliSankar weaves a complex narrative that explores the intersecting forces of gender, sexuality, and class in a globalized society. Through a Marxist lens, the novel reveals how globalization, far from being a liberating force, reinforces capitalist structures that perpetuate gender inequality and marginalize non-normative identities. Muskaan's struggles with societal expectations highlight the ways in which capitalism commodifies and controls gender and sexuality, upholding patriarchal norms to maintain economic and social order. The novel critiques the global capitalist system for its role in sustaining traditional gender roles, reinforcing heteronormativity, and exploiting marginalized identities. Ultimately, Talking of Muskaan serves as a powerful commentary on how globalization, despite its promises of progress and inclusivity, often intensifies the very inequalities it purports to address. The novel calls for resistance against these oppressive structures, advocating for a more equitable and just

society that dismantles the intersecting forces of capitalism, patriarchy, and heteronormativity. By situating Muskaan's personal experiences within the broader global context, Sankar's work challenges readers to reconsider the social, cultural, and economic systems that shape gender and identity in a globalized world.

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