



The Nexus of Neoliberalism and Ethnicity in Sankar's The Middleman

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the intricate nexus of neoliberalism and ethnicity in Sankar's novel, *The Middleman*. Set against the backdrop of a rapidly changing socio-economic landscape, the novel provides a rich terrain for examining how neoliberal policies and ideologies influence ethnic identities and interactions. Through the protagonist, Somnath, and his journey from a disillusioned graduate to a middleman in the business world, the narrative delves into the impacts of economic liberalization on individual lives and community dynamics. The study highlights how neoliberalism fosters a competitive environment that both marginalizes and commodifies ethnic identities, altering traditional social structures and relationships. By employing a critical analysis of character development, plot progression, and thematic elements, this paper demonstrates how Sankar portrays the complexities of navigating ethnic identity within a neoliberal framework. Ultimately, the analysis aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of the socio-cultural ramifications of neoliberalism in postcolonial literature, shedding light on the nuanced interplay between economic policies and ethnic realities.

Keywords: Neoliberalism, ethnicity, socio-economic dynamics, commodification

Introduction: In *The Middleman*, Sankar masterfully explores the nexus of neoliberalism and ethnicity, offering a compelling narrative that reflects the socio-economic transformations of postcolonial India. Through critical analysis of the novel's themes, characters, and plot, this paper highlights the intricate ways in which neoliberal policies influence ethnic identities and social dynamics. By examining these intersections, the research contributes to a deeper understanding of the cultural and economic implications of neoliberalism in postcolonial literature. It offers a poignant exploration of the intersection between neoliberalism and ethnicity in postcolonial India. Through the protagonist Somnath, the narrative vividly portrays the socio-economic shifts and their impact on individual and collective identities. This paper seeks to examine how neoliberal policies influence ethnic identities, shaping and reshaping traditional social structures. Neoliberalism, characterized by market deregulation, privatization, and reduced state intervention, has been a dominant economic ideology since the late 20th century. Its impacts on ethnic identities and community dynamics have been widely studied in various contexts. Postcolonial literature often reflects these changes, providing insights into the lived experiences of individuals navigating new economic realities. In *The Middleman*, Sankar delves into the effects of neoliberalism on Bengali society, using Somnath's journey as a lens to explore broader socio-economic transformations. Previous studies have highlighted how neoliberalism exacerbates social inequalities and commodifies cultural identities, which is evident in the novel's depiction of ethnic interactions. There are numerous criticisms of neoliberalism, including its likely risk to democracy, the rights of workers, and the right to self-determination for a sovereign nation. It has likewise been blamed for giving cooperations an excess of force and demolishing monetary imbalance. It relates to 'laissez-faire economics', a way of thinking that endorses a negligible measure of government obstruction in the monetary issues of people and society. Sharae Deckard and Stephen Shapiro in their essay "World-Culture and the Neoliberal World System: An Introduction" very rightly mentions:

Almost unused as a term in the twentieth century and never unequivocally deployed by the historical figures now routinely taken as its exemplary advocates, 'neoliberalism' has, nonetheless, become a standard keyword to categorize the present regime of accumulation, especially after the 2008 financial crash that made the term 'globalization' seem inadequate. (Deckard 2)

Because of a wide range of critics, like David Harvey, Naomi Klein, Michel Foucault, Wendy Brown, Jamie Peck, Jason W. Moore, Neil Smith, Philip Mirowski, Anatole Kaletsky, Gérard Duménil and Dominique Lévy, a brief experience with the term and a commonsensical comprehension of its moves has been portrayed by a nexus of rehearses and proverbial suspicions about ongoing methods of capitalist commerce. Highlights of neoliberalism incorporate state liberation of business sectors, privatization, and hostility to work and social government assistance methodologies; the domination of finance capital; the revitalized colonialism on the global level and in homegrown fields. Neoliberalism is the prevailing philosophy saturating the public arrangements of numerous legislatures in created and agricultural nations and of global offices like the World Bank, International Monetary Fund, World Trade Organization, and numerous specialized offices of the United Nations including the World Health Organization. This philosophy proposes that the decrease of state arbitrations in monetary and social exercises and the liberation of work and monetary business sectors, as well as of trade and ventures, have freed the tremendous capability of private enterprise to make a remarkable time of social prosperity in the total populace. The term spreads through scholarly and media devices, it is at risk of turning out to be omnipresent to such an extent that its verifiable knowledge is blurred, and its insightful edge is dulled or lost.

As a middleman, Somnath navigates a competitive business environment that rewards entrepreneurship but also fosters corruption and moral ambiguity. This reflects the neoliberal emphasis on individual success and market efficiency, often at the expense of ethical considerations and social welfare. Somnath's transformation from a disillusioned graduate to a middleman reflects the economic liberalization policies that were becoming prominent in India during the period depicted in the novel. The shift from a state-controlled economy to a more market-driven one creates new opportunities and challenges, which are central to Somnath's experiences. The novel vividly portrays how neoliberalism affects ethnic identities and social interactions. Somnath's interactions with various ethnic communities reveal the commodification of cultural identities. In the pursuit of business success, ethnic markers become transactional, leading to the erosion of traditional cultural values. The competitive environment fostered by neoliberalism exacerbates social inequalities, marginalizing those who cannot adapt to the new economic order. Somnath's rise as a middleman highlights the tension between maintaining ethnic solidarity and pursuing individual success in a neoliberal context. Thomas Biebricher argues, "neoliberalism no longer faces greater analytic hurdles than other political positions like conservatism or socialism." (8–9) A very general criticism of neoliberalism is that it undermines democracy. This may be on the grounds that high monetary disparity subverts a majority rules government, as Martin Gilens (2014) argues in *Affluence and Influence*. One more manner by which neoliberalism could subvert democracy is by focusing on the protection of classical liberal economic liberties, like one side to private property. These can prompt limitations on the capacity of majority rule residents to decide to reallocate riches. He did not quit his struggle at least managing a private job after disdainful refusal from several doorsteps of public institutions and organizations. Here, Slobodian argues that all neoliberals "saw the intellectual project as finding the right state and the right law to serve the market order. (Slobodian 87)." He was motivated and consoled himself to strive for at least a private job, like some of his close relatives, near and dear. Somnath started a fresh journey towards this goal and started sending applications to various private companies like Best Keen Richards, Iron and Steel Control with a ray of hope to get a clerical or even a job of a waiter. "We don't want to be officers; the job of a clerk will do. And given my situation, I'm ready to even be a waiter". (Sankar 45) But Somanth could not eradicate his father's burden becoming self-reliant, "any job will do, Kamala (Somnath's elder brother's wife), Khokon desperately needs to settle down...but I don't see any sign of it." (45) Jessica Whyte very rightly mentions in this context "neoliberalism has a normative dimension that goes beyond the economic, since neoliberals believed that a functioning competitive market required an adequate moral and legal foundation, such that the arguments for neoliberal institutions involved an appeal to normative principles." (233)

The first part of the novel delineates the extreme scarcity of jobs in the government or public sector even in the later part of the twentieth century and the initiation of the state deregulation of market which is prominent in the following excerpt:

When employment does not want me, why should I want employment? I was in a pathetic state when I lost everything in Pakistan and came to India. I worked as a porter in Murgihata for a while. Then I borrowed ten at very high interest to buy a basket of oranges. I went to the wholesale market in Chitpur. The red and blue symbols on the crates meant nothing to me. An old Muslim took pity on me and helped me buy a crate of oranges. Sales were good the first day after five hours on the kerb, I had made a net profit of two rupees. I would even eat a couple of oranges without realizing it. The moustachioed giant who collected the debt every evening was amazed. He hadn't expected me to be able to return the money. I tossed ten rupees and ten annas at him, and still had one rupee and six annas left over. (Sankar 92)

The hero of the novel sighs with utmost pain, "Honestly Sukumar, I'm not going for an interview" (Sankar 92) and he starts venturing with one of his well-wishers Bishubabu, "forty-five years old, his complexion was extremely dark, and as his hair had begun thinning in front it made his forehead seem broader than it was" (Sankar 76), who helped Somanth to introduce with Mullick Babu. He assisted Somnath with the printing of the visiting cards and letter heads, and to determine the name of his company 'Somnath Enterprise'. Bishubabu sparks the motive of business in Somnath in an informal walk crossing "General Post Office (GPO), Writers'

Building and Lal Bazar before reaching Chitpur Road. Further ahead to the right was Poddar Court, and beyond that Bagri Market” posing a question, “what should people do if they don’t get a job?” Adding a comment, he said “they should plunge in at the deep end and grab whatever they can see”. (Sankar 77) Saying this Bishubabu took him to a mystic sphere at Kanoria Court and introduced him “a completely different world” making him understand “Businessmen never like doing things the normal way, they always want to get things done faster: so, they either break the queue and pay their way to the front if necessary, or they climb the stairs.” (Sankar 79)

Somnath’s character arc encapsulates the complexities of navigating ethnic identity within a neoliberal framework. His initial idealism is gradually replaced by pragmatism, reflecting the broader societal shift towards market-driven values. The novel’s thematic elements, including corruption, moral ambiguity, and social mobility, underscore the pervasive influence of neoliberalism on personal and collective identities. The portrayal of secondary characters further enriches the analysis. Each character represents different facets of ethnic and economic dynamics, from traditionalists clinging to old values to opportunists exploiting the new economic order. These interactions highlight the multifaceted impact of neoliberalism on ethnic communities. The protagonist started to know the ways and avenues of business holding hands of Bishubabu. The flourishing market of trade and business in the post-independent Calcutta is a point to be marked as the port-city remained one of the earliest important locations of trade and exchange with the rest of the world. This neoliberal approach was traced in the socio-economic affairs of the city since the first part of the twentieth century. It is important here to mention an excerpt.

Bishubabu then took Somnath to the market. Pushing the crowds aside to make room, he said, of course all the businesses in the world supply orders in the easiest. It can be the most comfortable to too, provided it works...someone has the horse and someone else the cart; your job is to get them together and make your money in the process. Basically, someone has something to sale. You find out the selling price. Then, if you can find a buyer willing to pay a little more, you win the jackpot. (Sankar 96)

The story presents a bunch of characters who are in various stages of business and capitals of that time; Mr. Shridhar, Mohonlal Nopani, Natabar Mitra, Mr. Adak, Kedia are some of them who mediate with the fully grown-up businessmen like Mr. Goenka, Mr. Sengupta, Umanath Joshi and so on. One focal concern about neoliberalism is that, regardless of whether it supports financial development, it additionally increases monetary imbalance, which is risky in more than one way. Two sorts of imbalance reactions are by and large advertised.

As a fresher Somnath is introduced to the world of trade and business by the mediator class people and he starts his journey on that way with several ups and downs in the company of those people. The journey of the protagonist towards liberalization of his own is very symbolic in this story. He was provided a corner of a room to start the business with a table, chair, and telephone connection free of cost initially by Bishubabu, but it would be chargeable after three months. Somnath starts his venture under the guidance of Brijubabu to sale out the duplicating paper and envelopes. Ashok Chatterjee, the husband of his friend Sreemoyee helped Somnath to accomplish the task of selling the products. In this context, it is very significant to mention the opinion of Steger and Roy,

Some say that neoliberalism is an ideology where everyone is supposed to focus on economic prosperity or economic growth. Others say that neoliberalism is an ethos of the firm that rejects corporate social responsibility, instead recommending that firms focus solely on their bottom lines. (Steger & Roy 13)

Once they reached Ashok’s office, he took Somnath directly to Mr. Ganguly. ‘This is a special friend of mine. Do help him, if possible,’ he said. Somnath was lucky. Mr. Ganguly examined the samples. He needed twenty-five reams immediately and asked for the rate. Somnath took out the letterhead that Mullick had printed for him and wrote a quotation on the spot. Mr. Ganguly summoned a clerk. ‘Could you please find out how much we paid for paper last time?’ The clerk brought a file and showed it to Mr. Ganguly. He looked at it and told Somnath, ‘your rate is better. We will pay cash.’ When Somnath brought up the envelope Mr. Ganguly asked him to leave a few samples and the rates. He promised to get back to Somnath after checking their stocks. The transaction was completed by five o’clock, after deducting expenses three crisp ten-rupee notes sat in Somnath’s pocket. His first ever income. An experience as breath taking as first love. Here is worthy to mention Friedman who holds that piece of the case for “opportunity is that we do not have the foggiest idea what people should esteem on the grounds that nobody truly understands what easy street comprises in; a free society is great since it permits individuals to try different things with various types of life to respond to those inquiries for themselves.” (Friedman 185) And keeping in mind that Friedman declared that enterprises’ most memorable obligation is to expand benefits for their investors and that public strategy ought to guarantee that the boost of benefit works to the advantage of all, even he does not advocate a specific record of what people should esteem.

Conclusion: Sankar’s *The Middleman* offers a nuanced critique of neoliberalism, illustrating its profound impact on ethnic identities and social structures. The novel’s depiction of Somnath’s journey provides a microcosm of the broader socio-economic transformations occurring in postcolonial India. By focusing on the intersection of neoliberalism and ethnicity, the novel raises important questions about the sustainability of traditional cultural values in a rapidly changing economic landscape. The analysis reveals how neoliberal

policies can both marginalize and commodify ethnic identities, leading to a reconfiguration of social hierarchies and relationships. This dynamic interplay between economic forces and cultural identities is a critical aspect of postcolonial literature, providing valuable insights into the complexities of contemporary social realities. In Post-colonial India, since the independence from the British rule, government organizations started stumbling to facilitate its citizen of various academic stature accommodating properly with their matched portfolio causing a massive chaos in the society of every state especially in Calcutta, West Bengal where the population was difficult to manage because of the partition in 1947.

Sankar's *The Middleman* presents a compelling exploration of the intersection between neoliberalism and ethnicity, offering a vivid portrayal of the socio-economic transformations in postcolonial India. Through the protagonist Somnath, the novel encapsulates the challenges and complexities of navigating ethnic identity in a neoliberal context. This analysis reveals how economic liberalization and market-driven policies influence individual and collective identities, often commodifying cultural markers and exacerbating social inequalities. The character of Somnath serves as a microcosm for broader societal changes, illustrating the tension between traditional cultural values and the demands of a neoliberal economy. His journey from an idealistic graduate to a pragmatic middleman reflects the pervasive influence of neoliberalism on personal ethics and social relationships. Secondary characters and their interactions further underscore the multifaceted impact of neoliberal policies on ethnic communities. By highlighting the commodification and marginalization of ethnic identities, *The Middleman* raises critical questions about the sustainability of cultural heritage in the face of economic pressures. The novel's thematic elements, including corruption, moral ambiguity, and social mobility, provide a nuanced critique of neoliberalism, emphasizing its profound implications for social dynamics and ethnic identities.

This study contributes to a deeper understanding of the cultural and economic ramifications of neoliberalism in postcolonial literature. By examining the nexus of neoliberalism and ethnicity in Sankar's *The Middleman*, it sheds light on the intricate interplay between economic policies and cultural realities, offering valuable insights into contemporary social issues. The novel's portrayal of these themes serves as a significant reminder of the ongoing relevance of postcolonial narratives in understanding the complexities of modern economic and social transformations.

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