

# When Labour Becomes Loss: A Marxist Critique On Alienation in Tagore's *Kabuliwala*

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## Abstract

*The notion of alienation has been profoundly explored in Karl Marx's writings. It reveals the estrangement of individuals from their labor, society, and sense of self due to capitalist systems. The current study employs a Marxist theory, particularly the concept of alienated labor, to critically analyze Rabindranath Tagore's short story, Kabuliwala. The story is set in Kolkata, India, and recounts the life of Rahamat, an Afghan merchant. He grows distant from his native land, work, and personal ties. This analysis looks at the social and economic aspects of Rahamat's detachment. It highlights his displacement as a worker from another country and how personal bonds become commodities. The study also delves into Rahamat's connection with Mini, using it to criticize the way things are turned into goods for sale and the gap between rich and poor. The researcher has adopted a qualitative method for close reading, based on Caine's model, that sheds light on how Rahamat's experiences reflect the alienating forces of capitalism. Karl Marx's concept of alienation has been adopted as a theoretical framework, primarily focusing on his notions as expressed in the Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844 (1959) and the Communist Manifesto (1848). Roudro Mukhopadhyay's scholarly work, Karl Marx's Theory of Alienation (2021), has also been used to complement the core concept of the theoretical framework. By delving into the socio-economic dimensions of alienation, this research focuses on the transformative power of literature to critique structural inequalities and muster up empathy for marginalized communities.*

**Keywords:** Alienation, Commodification, Capitalism, Exploitation, Socio-Economic Disparity.

## Introduction

The concept of 'alienation' is generally regarded as having relatively contemporary European roots. Originating from the Latin noun *alienatio* and the verb *alienare*, which means to "take away," "remove," or "create separation," the term alienation was first well-known in theological literature (Sarfraz, 1997). In Karl Marx's writings, "alienated labor" denotes coerced and obligatory work in which the worker experiences a lack of fulfilment, pleasure, contentment, autonomy, power, and opportunities for mental or physical growth. An individual in this predicament feels isolated, degraded, insignificant, and unvalued.

For Marx, "Alienation is essentially experiencing the world and oneself passively, receptively, as the subject separated from the object" (Fromm, 1966, p. 44). The Marxist perspective on

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alienation, upon thorough examination, presents specific challenges. "The Marxian concept of alienation denotes not merely a lack of autonomy, control, and ownership over one's labor, but also the subjugation of labor to the directions of another individual"(Sarfraz, 1997, p. 3). According to Marx, only wage labor and capital remain as the two types of capital because of the capitalist emphasis on profit rates and capital accumulation. Therefore, "[a]s a result, society is disintegrating into two groups-owners and workers- who remain implacably hostile to each other" (Mukhopadhyay, 2021, p. 2). Mukhopadhyay (2021) further asserts that Karl Marx analyses the relationship between private ownership and alienated labor, ultimately determining that private ownership is "the product, the result, the necessary consequence of alienated labor" (p. 3).

Marx goes on to describe the strategies used by the capitalists to take advantage of the working class in his manuscript. Additionally, he made remarks about how capitalists exploit labor by adhering to manufacturing patterns that benefit them. The governing classes and the working classes were divided as a result of this tyranny. He called this behavior "alienation," meaning that while working people gave their all at work, they received almost nothing in return, which led to a class divide. Moreover, alienation posits that workers become estranged from their essence under capitalism to the extent that they are unable to function by their species-being, resulting in a disconnection from their existence.

Nevertheless, in colonial India, migrant laborers such as Rahamat formed a substantial lower class. Historical records reveal that by the late 19th century, more than 30% of Kolkata's workforce consisted of migrant laborers from areas such as Afghanistan and Bihar, frequently surviving exploitative wages and social marginalization (Bhattacharya, 2019). Likewise, the International Labour Organization (2023) indicates that 56% of South Asian migrant workers face systemic alienation, encompassing pay theft and cultural marginalization. These data highlight the persistent significance of Marx's critique of capitalism and its alienating frameworks.

This paper examines Rabindranath Tagore's short story *Kabuliwala* (2009), analyzing its depiction of isolation, estrangement, and the human condition. Situated within the socio-economic context of colonial India, *Kabuliwala* explores themes of estrangement, dislocation, and the commodification of personal relationships. The story recounts the heartrending narrative of Rahamat, an Afghan merchant who peddles his wares in Kolkata. In the middle of his challenges as a migrant laborer, he develops a poignant connection with Mini, a little girl, evoking memories of his daughter at home. Moreover, this study seeks to reveal various representations of alienation in *Kabuliwala* (2009) and its wider implications for comprehending labor, displacement, and human resilience by integrating diverse viewpoints. Moreover, the analysis centers on the concept of alienation, which elucidates Rahamat's experiences as a working-class migrant and his estrangement from his labor, society, and personal connections.

### Research Questions

- 1) How does the relationship between the *Kabuliwala* and Mini serve as a critique of the alienating forces of capitalism, analyzing from a Marxist perspective?
- 2) What factors are responsible for the alienation of the protagonist, Rahamat, in Tagore's *Kabuliwala*?

### Research Objectives

- 1) To analyze the relationship between the *Kabuliwala* and Mini as a critique of the alienating forces of capitalism, using Marxist theory to explore themes of estrangement, commodification, and socio-economic disparity.

- 2) To examine the factors contributing to Rahamat's alienation in Rabindranath Tagore's *Kabuliwala*, focusing on his disconnection from labour, homeland, and personal relationships within the socio-economic context.

### Significance of the Study

This study is of prime importance both academically and socially as it utilizes Marxist theory to critically analyze Rabindranath Tagore's *Kabuliwala*. The research examines Rahamat's alienation from his work, homeland, and interpersonal relationships, emphasizing the widespread consequences of capitalist exploitation and relocation. The study highlights the conspicuous significance of Marxist theory in tackling modern concerns, including labour mobility, economic disparity, and social isolation. It examines the universality of parental affection and human perseverance in the face of adversity, promoting empathy and a deeper comprehension of marginalized cultures. This research focuses on Rahamat's lived experiences, critiquing institutional inequalities while highlighting literature's transformative power as a means to explore solidarity, resilience, and means for social change.

### Literature Review

Schacht (2015) states that Hegel identifies two categories of alienation. The individual undergoes a condition of separation in the initial form. The individual no longer associates with the 'social substance' or the social, political, and cultural frameworks. He does not intend or consciously desire estrangement; rather, it is a form of imposed alienation. In the second type of alienation, the individual forfeits or cedes his rights to another entity, involving a deliberate surrender to attain a specific goal. However, for Marx, alienation means that a person does not see himself as an active agent in comprehending the world; instead, nature, others, and self are foreign to him. Alienation includes passively and receptively viewing oneself and the world as the subject rather than an object (Overend, 1975, p. 301).

Collins (2008) notes that the estranged nature of labour for the worker is evident in the reality that it is not his job, but rather work performed for another, indicating that in his labour, he is not his own master but belongs to someone else. Likewise, according to Sarfraz (1997), the Marxist notion of alienation signifies not only a lack of control, autonomy, and ownership over one's labour but also the subjugation of work to the authority of another individual. Marx proposed the notion of self-estrangement as an essential element in the analysis of alienation. By his tradition, many sociologists saw self-estrangement as a fundamental aspect of alienation, as all other manifestations seem to culminate in self-estrangement.

Saleem and Bani-ata (2014) explain that early Indo-English novelists recognized alienation's issues. Early Indo-English novelists felt isolated for socio-political reasons, and their depiction of alienated people seems to show the hazards of mixing two cultures, which leads to extreme isolation. The theme of the estranged protagonist is common in 20th-century European and American literature. Substantial efforts are being made to clarify the confusion, discontent, alienation, fragmentation, and estrangement of modern people. Alienation serves as a central theme and persistent element in various Indo-English literary works.

Bannerji (2020) in his paper presents a comparative examination of Karl Marx and Rabindranath Tagore, highlighting their mutual dedication to social revolution and humanistic principles, especially about alienation. Both criticized reified social structures and pursued revolutionary transformation. Marx through a communist revolution targeting worker alienation, and Tagore through the decolonization of social awareness. Their research connects alienation to overarching

issues of aesthetics, production, and Enlightenment values. The amalgamation of their viewpoints provides a modernist critique intended to reformulate consciousness and social dynamics, promoting universal humanism as a catalyst for transformation.

Saren and Ganguly (2024) critically analyze alienation and isolation in Rabindranath Tagore's *The Postmaster*, emphasizing the emotional and social chasms between the metropolitan postmaster and the rural country context. The protagonist's feeling of detachment shows a wider critique of cultural alienation and the solitude intrinsic to human life. The postmaster's failure to assimilate into society highlights themes of personal alienation under inflexible societal frameworks, while his relationship with Ratan, the orphan, further elucidates the intricacies of attachment and abandonment in the context of solitude.

Nazeer et al. (2021) examine alienation, envy, and betrayal among the principal characters in Hamid's novel *Moth Smoke*. These aspects are delineated and emphasized through Karl Marx's notion of alienation. *Moth Smoke* (2000) illustrates the realities of Pakistani society by highlighting its flaws and inadequacies. According to Dr. Mohammad Muazzam Sharif, while all cultures globally exhibit imperfections, the prominent class distinctions within Pakistani society foster instability among its inhabitants, incite conflict and ultimately contribute to societal disintegration. Marx's theory elucidates the dependence of the lower class on the elite class. However, alienation becomes a prominent theme in the novel. An alienated individual experiences emotional, physical, and psychic isolation or detachment from society. In the context of the novel, Daru and Mumtaz, two of the main protagonists, alienate themselves and other people. In his alienation theory, Marx uses "Entfremdung," or "estrangement." Entfremdung refers to social alienation, such as living in a tiered society and feeling isolated and estranged. An unequal and corrupt society exploits the poor, which promotes class conflict and isolates underprivileged people from themselves and their community.

Ali et al. (2022) focus on Marxist literary criticism that explains the phenomena of power and hegemony. In *Twilight in Delhi*, Ahmad Ali depicts Delhi as a Muslim-dominated nation, depicting its sad fall and captivity. The story underrepresents most Hindus and other minorities. Any perceptive reader will see the tale as incomplete and biased without the narrator's voice. Hindus were the conquered, not the governing class, therefore, their absence is striking despite being the region's original occupants. According to Dr. Muazzam, the Marxist theory of history argues that economic and power interactions among social classes determine a group's identity and traits. According to binary opposition, rulers cannot exist without the ruled ones. A ruler depends on the ruled, but both groups are not equal in identity and representation. Power and class have always barred the marginalized from social, political, and literary affairs.

## Research Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research approach to analyze Rabindranath Tagore's *Kabuliwala* (2009) from a Marxist perspective. It focuses on the themes of class struggle, alienation, and identity. The research method is primarily based on Caine's model of close reading, wherein the story is examined in detail to uncover the socio-economic dynamics between the characters, particularly the relationship between the Kabuliwala (Rahamat) and Mini.

## Data Collection

The primary data source is Rabindranath Tagore's *Kabuliwala* (2009), a version of the story translated by Mohammad A. Quayum. It includes textual passages that reflect Rahamat's alienation, his emotional connection with Mini, and the broader class disparities presented in the

story. The secondary sources include scholarly interpretations of Marxist theory, particularly Marx's *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844* (1959) and the *Communist Manifesto* (1848). Moreover, the researcher quoted Roudro Mukhopadhyay's scholarly work, *Karl Marx's Theory of Alienation* (2021), to provide a deeper analysis of alienation and its types in detail.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The current study has adopted a theoretical framework of Marxist theory, primarily emphasizing Karl Marx's notion of alienation as expressed in the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844* (1959) and the *Communist Manifesto* (1848). Marxist theory highlights class struggle, economic exploitation, and societal structures. The researcher has used the said theory to provide the analysis of socio-economic dynamics in Rabindranath Tagore's *Kabuliwala*. The analysis centres on the concept of alienation, which elucidates Rahamat's experiences as a working-class migrant and his estrangement from his labour, society, and personal connections. Moreover, the researcher has used Roudro Mukhopadhyay's scholarly work, *Karl Marx's Theory of Alienation* (2021), to complement the core concept of the theoretical framework.

### **Analysis and Discussion**

“[T]he sight of an alien person brings to mind the image of a lonely hut beside a river in the midst of a forest” (Tagore, 2009, p. 3).

#### **Kabuliwala and Mini's Relationship: A Marxist Perspective**

Rabindranath Tagore's short story *Kabuliwala* (2009) painstakingly reveals the bond between the Kabuliwala, Rahamat, and Mini, a young Bengali girl. Their relationship is characterized by affection, innocence, and emotional profundity. Notwithstanding their significant disparities in age, culture, and social class, the two establish a distinctive connection that surpasses these limitations. Rahamat is a fruit vendor from Afghanistan who sees Mini as a reflection of his young daughter residing in his homeland. Mini's playful curiosity and innocence captivate him, prompting a warm and affectionate response. Tagore (2009) writes that “the sight of that innocent joy between a little girl and a grown man on autumn mornings used to move me deeply” (p. 2). Tagore portrays their love as an extraordinary, genuine friendship transcending class status. Mini's affection and Rahamat's warm response demonstrate a reciprocal exchange without ulterior motives or cultural expectations. The innocent joy shared by the two represents a realm in which social distinctions and economic roles are momentarily curtailed.

However, their relationship is founded on an authentic human connection rather than societal or economic expectations. Mini takes pleasure in listening to Rahamat's narratives, and their jovial dialogues become a frequent event. The warmth and affection in their encounters are revealed throughout the story. As in an instance, in the story, Rahamat ambled in the street “[b]ut the moment [...] at hearing Mini's call, turned around with a smile and approached the house” (Tagore, 2009, p. 1). In a capitalist society, human interactions often focus on economic transactions or material advantages. In *The Communist Manifesto*, it is argued that “[t]he bourgeoisie has torn away from the family its sentimental veil, and has reduced the family relation to a mere money relation” (Engels, Chapter 1). But it is contrary in the case of Rahamat and Mini; when he beams and approaches Mini's house, he does it not as a merchant pursuing benefit but as an individual engaging in a profound emotional bond. Mini perceives Rahamat not merely as a fruit vendor but as an individual deserving of interaction, whilst Rahamat considers Mini as an

accurate representation of his daughter, eliciting emotions of affection and warmth. Her purity and devotion enable Rahamat to pursue a relationship free from materialistic endeavours.

Rahamat's companionship with Mini is more profound and affectionate than her bond with her father. Her father, while loving, is engrossed in his societal positions and obligations. Rahamat, conversely, listens to her attentively and replies with sincere affection, fostering a connection grounded in emotional reciprocity. Mini's father recognizes the uniqueness of this connection, as he asserts that “[i]n her short five-year life, Mini had never found a more intent listener before other than her father” (Tagore, 2009, p. 2). Nevertheless, Tagore denounces a society in which societal roles and economic functions frequently influence relationships through their interactions. Furthermore, Rahamat's closeness with Mini represents an exceptional instance of connection that surpasses his duties as a peddler. When the narrator calls him inside the house, “[t]he Kabuliwala took out some raisins and apricots from inside the bag and gave it to Mini” (Tagore, 2009, p. 2). Likewise, Tagore (2009) quotes that “[h]e had been visiting Mini almost daily, and by offering her pistachio nuts he had already won a large part of the girl's childish heart” (p. 2). In this way, Rahamat shows pure affection and emotional closeness, free from any perks. This connection sharply contrasts with the alienating dynamics of capitalism, where human relationships often diminish to mere economic means. Similarly, when Mini's father offers him money, Rahamat says, “[i]t is remembering her face that I bring these gifts for your child” (Tagore, 2009, p. 5). This emphasizes the integrity of their relationship and the humanity that he shows towards Mini, regardless of any personal benefits.

### **Kabuliwala: Alienation of Labour and Class Struggle**

Rahamat, the Kabuliwala, is depicted as a dry fruit vendor, representing the working class that experiences labour alienation. He incessantly migrates from city to city and town to town to trade his goods. He is motivated by personal satisfaction and the economic necessity to sustain his family in Afghanistan. When the narrator calls him inside the house upon Mini's request, he is bound to buy something from Kabuliwala. As he says, “it would be unseemly to call the man all the way to the house and not buy anything” (Tagore, 2009, p. 1). Since his work is not driven by passion or fulfilment but by the necessity to survive. He sells goods to earn money and provide a livelihood for his family in his hometown. This reveals the Marxist notion of alienation, wherein the worker is disconnected from the result of their labour, their self-expression, and their community.

Marx contends that alienation occurs when working within capitalism detaches individuals from themselves, their labour, and their interpersonal connections. Rahamat, as a fruit vendor, is a labourer estranged from his nation, family, and cultural identity. His relationship with Mini briefly mitigates this alienation by offering him a connection that is not based on economic exchange. In contrast to the materialistic relationships that define his work life, Rahamat's connection with Mini lacks materialistic intentions. When he returns several years after imprisonment, he brings some grapes and raisins as a gift for Mini. The narrator offers some money for those gifts to him, but he refuses by saying, “please don't pay me for these fruits [...] I don't come here for business” (Tagore, 2009, p. 5). Rahamat's occupation as a fruit vendor alienates him from the merchandise he offers.

Tagore depicts the class struggle through the difference between Rahamat and the narrator's family. Rahamat's life as a working-class migrant labourer strikingly contrasts with the narrator's privileged life. The narrator's ability to provide a secure home and education for Mini shows the fundamental inequities inherent in the economic system. In the text, in the narrator's words, it is evident that “he was an ordinary fruit-peddler from Kabul and I belonged to an aristocratic Bengali

family” (Tagore, 2009, p. 5). However, Rahamat symbolizes the proletariat and his occupation of selling dry fruits door-to-door is marked by hardship and financial instability. In contrast to the narrator's family, which experiences security and pleasure, Rahamat's existence relies solely on his physical labour and market engagements. This juxtaposition demonstrates Marx's concept of class inequality, wherein "the bourgeoisie has diminished personal value to exchange value" (Engels, Chapter 1).

Rahamat is depicted as an individual who roamed the streets, bearing a conspicuous bag and selling his merchandise. In the story, he is depicted as an “[a]fghan street vendor, with a turban on his head, a bag over his shoulder [...] passing through the street slowly” (Tagore, 2009, p. 1). This vignette embodies Rahamat's position as a labourer bound to the capitalist system, where his identity is overshadowed by his role as a fruit salesman. Marx's concept of class struggle, where "the history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles" (Engels, Chapter 1), finds an echo in Rahamat's marginalization.

Rahamat's imprisonment further highlights the class struggle. He engaged in a scuffle with a person in the vicinity over debt and “[i]n the heat of the argument [...] took out a knife and stabbed the man [...] Rahamat was sent to jail for several years” (Tagore, 2009, p. 4). The punishment Rahamat faces is not only a consequence of his actions but also a reflection of systemic inequalities that offer little support to marginalized individuals. Marx also critiques the role of the state in maintaining class hierarchies by contending that “[t]he executive of the modern state is but a committee for managing the common affairs of the whole bourgeoisie” (Hyman, 1975, p. 121). Rahamat's imprisonment emphasizes this notion by skewering the judicial system that imposes punitive measures on the working class. Moreover, Rahamat's economic precarity and subsequent incarceration highlight the overarching dynamics of class conflict.

### **Rahamat's Alienation in *Kabuliwala*: A Kaleidoscope of Estrangement**

Rahamat's alienation emanates from his estrangement from his family. Living in a distant country, he is disconnected from his daughter he fondly remembers and dreams of being with again. His emotional disconnect from his family serves as a metaphor for alienation often experienced by migrant workers, who are separated not just by space but also by class hierarchies. Rahamat's alienation is deeply rooted in his social marginalization. The physical alienation of a working-class expatriate in an alien city is matched with an emotional withdrawal. The skepticism and mistrust shown towards him reveal the societal alienation experienced by migrant labourers. He is not only perceived as an individual but as an emblem of the labour that benefits others. Moreover, Rahamat grows estranged from his identity and humanity. This internal alienation is exacerbated by the commodification of human connections, so even his affection for Mini is influenced by the economic forces that govern his existence.

### **Alienation from Self: The Loss of Personal Identity**

In *Kabuliwala*, Rahamat is estranged from his identity for his inner sense of self is eclipsed by the repressive dynamics of capitalism and the repercussions of migration. Distanced from his home in Kabul and estranged from his family, Rahamat is compelled to exist in a society that perceives him chiefly as a labourer. Throughout the story, he is referred to as a “Kabuliwala” by other characters. Even Mini, with whom he shares a close and selfless bond, calls him, “Kabuliwala, O Kabuliwala!” (Tagore, 2009, p. 1-3). The societal view of Rahamat as merely a “Kabuliwala” dehumanizes him and deprives him of his aspirations. It also constrains him to the confines of his economic role as a trader. This points out Marx's notion that in a capitalist society, a person's identity is subsumed

by their labour. "Labour not only produces commodities; it produces itself and the worker as a commodity" (Marx, 1959, p. 71). In this way, Rahamat's identity is limited to that of a trader and shows how a capitalist system diminishes individuals to their economic functions.

Rahamat's life revolves around his trade, which renders into a means for survival rather than satisfaction. This relates to the Marxist idea of labour being "external" to the worker since it does not allow him to express or develop his physical or mental capacities. According to Mukhopadhyay (2021), a man delineates the external nature of labour, which is extrinsic to human existence (p. 3). However, in the story, Rahamat's identity is fixed with his trade, and his trading bag symbolizes his labour. Whenever Mini sees his burlap sack, she questions, "Kabuliwala, O Kabuliwala, what is in your sack?" (Tagore, 2009, p. 2). In this manner, his identity is fixed with his trade and the trading goods that he carries in his bag. From a Marxist perspective, the worker perceives himself as an 'outsider' or disconnected from his role and development. "When he is working, he is not at home, and he is this 'Forced Laborer'" (Mukhopadhyay, 2021, p.4). This alienation estranges the worker from both their labour and their sense of self, resulting in a diminished personal identity. Similarly, when Kabuliwala appears before the narrator after spending several years in imprisonment, he is unrecognizable because "[h]e didn't have that customary sack with him, or the long hair and his burly look" (Tagore, 2009, p. 5). The physical attributes that characterized him as a trader, including his sack and robust physique, are now absent. This alteration signifies the significant influence of incarceration and social estrangement that leads to loss of identity. As already mentioned, Rahamat's recognition and identity are limited only to his occupation as a trader, therefore, when he is seen without his customary bag, he presents the sight of an alienated individual to the narrator. According to Mukhopadhyay (2021), "the laborer's economic activity is abstract, decided by others, and not liberating" (p. 4). Rahamat is deprived of his identity as a merchant, a father, and a human, eventually diminished to a mere product.

### **Alienation from Species-Being: An Exile from the Human Core**

Rahamat is forced to migrate from Afghanistan to Calcutta to make a living for his family. Thus, Rahamat's life revolves around survival in a foreign land, which limits his essence. According to Marx, humans are social and working beings, characterized as species-being with representational capabilities. Unlike animals, humans act not solely for individual objectives but also for the benefit of their species. In the story, Kabuliwala gives Mini nuts and raisins for free and out of affection. But her father didn't like this act and "took out a half-a-rupee coin and gave it to him. [He] took the money without any hesitation and put it in his bag" (Tagore, 2009, p. 2). Rahamat accepts the money despite his benevolent connection with Mini, which reveals the duality of his nature. He shows affection to Mini yet fulfils his obligation to support his family abroad, revealing his bond to his species-being as a father and provider.

Marx contends that alienation from species-being occurs when individuals cannot do creative or self-expressive work and have to do things that are necessary for life instead. Similarly, Rahamat is bereft of joy in his personal life, for his role is merely fixed as a trader of goods that he sells. Tagore (2009) quotes, "[e]very year Rahamat came to peddle merchandise on the streets of Kolkata" (p. 5). In this way, he is constrained to living a life as a trader and his identity is fixed to that of a foreign man from Afghanistan, as he is referred to as a 'Kabuliwala.' However, when Rahamat kills a man in a scuffle and is taken to prison, Mini appears before her. She calls his name, and his face suddenly lights up with a wide beam. "Since he didn't have the sling bag over his shoulder that day" (Tagore, 2009, p. 4), therefore, they couldn't have the usual discussion, and Mini couldn't ask Kabuliwala about the stuff or surprise that he has for her in his sack. In *Economic*

*and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, Marx (1959) asserts that "[t]he worker does not affirm himself in his work but denies himself; he feels miserable and unhappy" (p. 73). Likewise, Rahamat feels a sense of relief and contentment when evanescently deprived of his role as a trader. Nevertheless, the absence of his sling bag symbolizes that he is not only bereft of his profession but also from the human relationships associated with it, including his connection with Mini. This reveals his profound alienation from his species-being, as his humanity fades away from his commodification. It also shows that while Rahamat had altruistic feelings for Mini, on the contrary, her response lingered on material goods. When "labor develops into a way of self-preservation [...] the worker becomes alienated from their species" (Mukhopadhyay, 2021, p. 4). Although their age difference might be argued upon at the end of the story, that discussion is almost over. Because Mini, despite that she has matured, doesn't recognize him upon his return at all, and her cold reaction debunks the whole phenomenon of their so-called selfless affection.

Rahamat's alienation becomes further aggravated when he is incarcerated in prison for killing a man in a fracas. Marx (1959) propounds, "[m]an is a species-being [...] because he treats himself as the present, living species; because he treats himself as a universal and therefore a free being" (p. 75). Although Rahamat has shown copious care and affection to Mini and her father, they both forget about him and his agony in the prison. The narrator admits that "[w]e almost forgot about him [...] it never occurred to us once how this free-spirited man from the mountains was spending his years within the secluded walls of the jail" (Tagore, 2009, p. 4). Marx (1959) observes that alienation from species-being entails a severance from communal relationships, which are fundamental to human existence. Therefore, Rahamat's seclusion in an unfamiliar territory highlights this estrangement, as he is deprived of even human compassion from the people he cared for.

### **Alienation from Other People: Social Isolation and Marginalization**

Rahamat is alienated from other people for his social isolation, which is apparent in his interactions with those in his immediate contact. As a merchant from Afghanistan, he is regarded as an outsider and referred to as a 'Kabuliwala' instead of his real name. According to Marx (1959), "[m]an is alienated from other men. When man confronts himself, he also confronts other men" (p. 77). This estrangement is exacerbated by cultural and linguistic disparities, thus making him a subject of both intrigue and distrust. Rahamat's inability to speak fluent Bengali reveals his separation from the dominant culture. The narrator observes that Rahamat communicates with Mini "in broken Bengali to give his opinion" (Tagore, 2009, p.2). Later in the story, the narrator states that "Kabuliwala blared out stories of his homeland in his broken Bengali" (Tagore, 2009, p.3). This linguistic and cultural divide shows Rahamat's estrangement from others since his foreignness is linked not only to his demeanor but also to his ineptitude to converse fluently in the dominant language. The linguistic difference positions him as an "other," estranged from the Bengali community. When "we are alienated from our human existence, it also means that we are alienated from ourselves and each other in turn" (Mukhopadhyay, 2021, p.4). From a postcolonial perspective, Said (1978) argues that colonial and cultural systems create a binary between the "self" (the dominant culture) and the "Other" (the outsider), thus characterizing the latter as inferior or exotic.

Rahamat's role as a migrant dry-fruit vendor puts him in a vulnerable economic and social order. Marx's notion of alienation from others clarifies how capitalist systems disrupt relationships, diminishing them to mere economic exchanges and fostering social isolation. As a migrant, he is treated as an outsider, with societal stereotypes reducing him to his role as a trader. Mini's mother's

suspicion of Rahamat further exacerbates his social marginalization. The narrator asserts that “[s]he was not free of suspicion about the Kabuliwala, Rahamat, and nagged me to keep a watchful eye on him” (Tagore, 2009, p. 3). Mini’s mother projects societal fears and xenophobic stereotypes onto Rahamat despite his genuine affection for Mini. Her mistrust is evident in her questioning of Rahamat’s intentions as she raises multiple interrogatives, “[a]re there no such instances of child abduction? Isn’t slave-trade still in practice in Afghanistan? Is it altogether impossible for a giant Afghan to kidnap a little child?” (Tagore, 2009, p.3).

This dubiousness is rooted in stereotypes about Rahamat’s otherness, which alienates him from Mini’s household. Despite his pure intentions, such as his playful bond with Mini, societal prejudices reduce Rahamat to a caricature of danger and criminality, hence revealing his marginalization. Moreover, Mini’s mother’s apprehension towards Rahamat as a “giant Afghan” highlights how his identity is diminished. Despite his benign nature and paternal adoration for Mini, he is perceived as a source of menace and peril. Similarly, Rahamat gives a coin to Mini secretly out of selfless affection. Upon discovering it, “[h]er mother chided, why did you take it from him?” (Tagore, 2009, p. 2). Rahamat’s gesture of affection is viewed with suspicion, thus reducing his act of kindness to a presumed threat.

Apart from other characters, even Mini initially perceives Rahamat as an “Other” because she is xenophobic and feels frightened of him. “She had this childish fear that if someone looked through the bag of this Afghan man, several living children like herself would be found in there” (Tagore, 2009, p.1). This is the result of cultural and societal stereotypes that portray foreign individuals as potential threats. This fear is also symbolic of broader societal prejudices that marginalize and alienate individuals based on their ethnicity and economic roles. However, Mini’s fear is not based on any personal experience but rather on the internalized stereotypes that regard Rahamat as a potential abductor. It reflects how societal prejudices can distort personal interactions and reinforce alienation.

Moreover, Rahamat’s isolation reaches its culmination at the end of the story, when Mini doesn’t reciprocate his feelings as she used to in her childhood. It dawns upon Rahamat that Mini has now matured, and “[i]t became obvious to him that his own daughter had grown up as well and he would have to get to know her all over again” (Tagore, 2009, p.6). This reveals his profound alienation not only from Mini but also from his daughter. Being an itinerant vendor, he is alienated from his daughter and deprived of his ability to build or restore relationships. In this context, Mukhopadhyay (2021) asserts, “Man feels isolated from his own species, relatives, and associates. This spreads from man to man” (p. 4).

### **Alienation from the Product: Commodification of Labour**

Karl Marx posits that alienation from the product occurs when a worker becomes disconnected from the goods they manufacture or vend. In a capitalist system, products are commodified, resulting in the worker’s diminished relationship with their inherent value. Rahamat is detached from the product of his trade and alienated from the society that consumes them. For instance, when Rahamat gives raisins to Mini, her father instinctively offers payment. This act reduces Rahamat’s labour and the products of his work to mere economic transactions, thus curtailing his labour entirely within the bounds of commodification. Marx (1959) propounded that “[t]he worker is related to the product of labor as to an alien object [...] he becomes alien to the world, alien to himself, and alien to others” (p. 72).

Rahamat peddles goods such as dry fruits, nuts, and raisins, which he carries in his sack. However, these products lack personal significance for him. His labour is primarily focused on earning a

livelihood rather than providing personal satisfaction. This reveals Marx's concept that within capitalism, "the worker becomes a commodity." Rahamat's life revolves around producing goods for others, yet this labour isolates him from meaningful connections, including with his own family. Likewise, Marx (1959) asserts that under capitalism, "[t]he worker becomes all the poorer the more wealth he produces" (p. 133). Rahamat's labour enriches others, but it does not elevate his own status or connect him to the products of his work.

Moreover, he possesses a sack, which holds the fruits he sells. It symbolizes the commodification of Rahamat's labour. The sack represents his isolation as a trader and disconnection from humanity. When he returned on the occasion of Mini's wedding, "he had even brought a box of grapes and a few raisins wrapped in a packet, which he must have borrowed from some Afghan friend because his own customary sack was not there with him" (Tagore, 2009, p.5). This absence reflects how his labour, previously commodified, has further alienated him from his societal role, leaving him disconnected from both his work and personal identity. As Marx (1959) propounds, "[t]he product of labor, labor's object, confronts it as something alien, as a power independent of the producer" (p. 79). Therefore, Rahamat's labour no longer empowers him but instead estranges him from himself and his surroundings. The grapes and raisins, once indicative of his trade and freedom, are now diminished to borrowed items, showing his estrangement from the rewards of his labour.

## Conclusion

Rabindranath Tagore's story *Kabuliwala* (2009) explores the phenomenon of alienation through a profound exploration of the complexities of human relationships. This is set against the backdrop of social class, alienation and the capitalist system. It highlights the simple, warm feelings that can exist between people from different backgrounds. The bond between Rahamat and Mini surpasses social conventions and economic positions, thus revealing a meaningful relationship that is, in many ways, clouded by the stark realities of class conflict and estrangement. The story shows how capitalist systems reduce workers to mere economic tools, stripping them of their identity and humanity. It centers on Rahamat's alienation from self and species-being that Rahamat suffers because of his labour. He has been typecast as a trader, making him an agent of the capitalist system. Moreover, the study also skewers the commodification of human relationships, as Rahamat's acts of kindness towards Mini are often met with suspicion and mistrust. This is similar to stereotypes that exist in society that marginalize people based on their economic activities and their respective cultural identities. This skeptical suspicion of him, this feeling of being socially alienated from the host community, is part and parcel of the experience that migrant workers undergo. Thus, Rahamat is stripped not only of his identity as a merchant and father but of his humanity itself, gradually reduced to nothing more than a commodity. Moreover, the study critiques how capitalism commodifies human relationships and reinforces class divisions. It also highlights the struggles of migrant workers who face cultural and social marginalization. Through Rahamat's experiences, Tagore reveals the emotional and psychological costs of labor exploitation.

Furthermore, this study holds significant ramifications for literature, education, and policy. Researchers need to explore Marxist elements in South Asian literature to comprehend the influence of capitalism and colonialism on alienation. Educators may utilize *Kabuliwala* in educational settings to examine labour rights, migration, and social justice. It facilitates students' connection of literature to contemporary societal challenges. Policymakers must tackle the exploitation of migrant labour by enhancing pay, legal safeguards, and social integration initiatives. Public awareness initiatives can confront prejudices regarding migrants and foster

empathy. Examining narratives such as *Kabuliwala* enables society to comprehend and tackle the alienation experienced by workers globally.

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