



A Marxist Study of an Unsung Hero, Iqbal Masih by Susan Kuklin

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ABSTRACT

The focus of this study adopts a Marxist perspective to examine the phenomenon of child labour through the life and struggle of Iqbal Masih in Susan Kuklin's *Iqbal Masih and the Crusaders Against Child Slavery*. This research draws upon the economic theories of the Luxury Axiom and the Basu-Van model to contextualize its arguments. It investigates the origins of child labour and examines how economic structures sustain the class system and prolong exploitation. A qualitative, exploratory approach is used to identify the causes of child labour, its persistence, and the ways it reinforces class divisions. The outcomes of this research present Iqbal Masih as a symbolic figure for marginalized labourers, framing him as an unsung national hero. The study concludes by urging readers to reflect on their role in eradicating child labour.

Key Words: Iqbal Masih, Child Labour, Marxist Analysis, Exploitation and Class Conflict, Basu-Van Model and Luxury Axiom

INTRODUCTION

This paper examines Marxist theory in order to analyze child labour through the biography of Iqbal Masih with reference to Susan Kuklin's book *Iqbal Masih and the Crusaders Against Child Slavery*. The study explores how economic structures shape child labour, drawing on the Luxury Axiom and Basu-Van models.

In the selected book, Kuklin presents a young Pakistani child labourer, Iqbal Masih, who was assassinated at the age of twelve for resisting the entrenched networks of bonded labour. The book details his life and tragic death, exposing the structures that sustain child exploitation in Pakistan (Kuklin).

At the age of four, Iqbal was forced into bonded labour in Pakistan's carpet industry, where he endured harsh and exploitative working conditions. At twelve, he was killed in his village, Mureedke, for challenging the mafias and economic networks profiting from child labour. Though Iqbal Masih is no longer alive, his activities continue to inspire a global crusade of students and activists committed to rescuing and educating enslaved children. His life story stands as an influential testimony of resistance, sacrifice, and the continuing global struggle against child labour.

A significant number of children are compelled into exploitative and hazardous labour in industries such as brass, carpets, glass, matchboxes, agriculture, and domestic work. This reality exposes society's collective failure to provide a safe environment for children's development. While children's participation in household chores was common historically, industrialization and urbanization exacerbated exploitative forms of child labour (Sharma).

Child labour is a pressing issue across underdeveloped and developing countries, yet defining what constitutes legitimate work versus exploitative child labour remains debated. According to estimates, about 60 per cent of the world's children belong to Asia, and 19 per cent of them are engaged in child labour. South Asia, with about 1.463 billion people (22 per cent of the world population), has also witnessed rapid economic growth since the 1990s (Sharma).

Research Objectives

The study aims to explore the societal attitudes and structural behaviours that marginalize underprivileged communities, with a focus on Susan Kuklin's Iqbal Masih and the Crusaders Against Child Slavery. Specifically, the research highlights the discriminatory treatment faced by individuals lacking wealth or power, and it examines the challenges endured by the poor and minorities through the life and resistance of Iqbal Masih as presented in the selected text.

Research Questions

1. What is the role of Iqbal Masih, as portrayed by Susan Kuklin, in addressing and resisting child labour in society?
2. How can Iqbal Masih's life and actions be seen as breaking the socio-economic barriers of society?
3. How does Iqbal Masih's life serve as a role model for marginalized child workers?

LITERATURE REVIEW

The expression "child labour" is defined as "the labour that robs children of their childhood, their dignity, and hinders their physical and mental development. It

refers to work that is mentally, physically, socially, or morally hazardous and destructive” (Srivastava).

Historically, children have been compelled into labour by both parents and employers. In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, many children aged five to fourteen from poor families worked in factories, mines, agriculture, and home-based industries. Among the poorest nations globally, approximately one in four children is engaged in labour to help meet household needs. Nearly 30 per cent of child labour occurs in sub-Saharan Africa. Lack of schooling opportunities and poverty are considered the chief reasons for child labour (Edmonds).

For years, child labour has been a major global issue linked with insufficient educational opportunities, gender inequality, and poverty. However, not all forms of children’s participation in work are classified as child labour. Work that does not interfere with schooling or health may have limited positive effects (Ibrahim et al.).

The issue gained significant attention during the Industrial Revolution, when studies in the United Kingdom exposed harmful effects, motivating other countries to conduct similar research. The International Labour Organization (ILO) introduced its Minimum Age Convention in 1973, setting global standards for child employment. Despite progress, targets were not fully achieved. The elimination of child labour was included in the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and later in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which aim for eradication by 2030 (Ibrahim et al.).

A decline was observed in child labour rates from 1995 to 2000, but it remains a major concern. In 2016, an estimated 150 million children under the age of fourteen were engaged in work globally, often under hazardous conditions that undermined health and childhood. Most working children were aged 11–14, and about 60 million were between 5 and 11. Statistics show that 96 per cent of child labour occurs in Asia, Latin America, and Africa (Ibrahim et al.).

Children who engage in child labour often suffer from poor health, stunted growth, and malnutrition. Many studies indicate that long working hours worsen physical health; extended hours also heighten the risk of sexual abuse. Common health problems include tuberculosis, musculoskeletal pain, infectious diseases, eye strain, chronic cough, malnutrition, bone fractures, hearing loss, gastrointestinal infections, and skin diseases (Ibrahim et al.).

Child labour also heavily affects mental health. Studies consistently show a higher incidence of behavioural and mental disorders; socioeconomic status, school attendance, long hours, and exposure to abuse are key risk factors. Mental health issues include hopelessness, anxiety, low self-esteem, substance abuse, depression, conduct disorders, loneliness, and emotional disturbances (Ibrahim et al.).

Research Gap

There is a significant research gap because no literary work has directly examined Iqbal Masih from a literary perspective. Previous references have remained limited to background information or social commentary. This study represents the first scholarly attempt to critically engage with Iqbal Masih’s life as a

literary subject within a Pakistani context. It applies Marxist theory to Kuklin's text, thereby opening avenues for future literary and cultural studies on Iqbal Masih. The central focus remains on Iqbal Masih's representation in Kuklin's non-fiction narrative.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The research methodology employed is qualitative and exploratory, aimed at identifying underlying patterns and outcomes. Exploratory research examines questions not previously studied in depth (George). In literary research, exploratory methods are useful for identifying gaps, contextualizing texts, and indicating directions for future inquiry. Such studies often begin with a review of prior scholarship to highlight limitations and refine research questions (George).

According to Bhandari, "Qualitative study includes gathering and evaluating non-numerical data (e.g., text, video, or audio) to comprehend concepts, views, or experiences... to collect in-depth insights or create new ideas for research." Qualitative research relies on non-numerical sources—texts, interviews, or visual data—which are analyzed to uncover patterns of meaning. It provides deep insights into social and literary issues and can generate avenues for further study; it is widely adopted in the humanities and social sciences (Bhandari).

Marxism is a political, economic, and social theory that investigates the effects of the bourgeoisie on the proletariat and exposes the unequal distribution of wealth and rights. Class analysis is central: it explains how social structures are shaped not only by wealth but by relations of production (Wright). "Class consciousness" refers to awareness of social position and shared interests; workers recognize common exploitation and develop solidarity (Wright). "Class conflict" reflects the struggle between the proletariat, seeking fair wages and conditions, and the bourgeoisie, seeking to maximize profit (Wright).

Data Collection

The book *Iqbal Masih and the Crusaders Against Child Slavery* (Kuklin) serves as the primary source. A comprehensive reading was conducted to identify recurrent ideas, significant passages, and representative elements. A digital version facilitated precise referencing. Authoritative journals and academic publications were selected as secondary sources.

Data Analysis

Active reading and textual analysis were employed to interpret how Marxist concepts—such as class conflict, alienation, and commodification—apply to Iqbal Masih's life, circumstances, and contributions.

Findings

In *Iqbal Masih and the Crusaders Against Child Slavery*, Susan provides an extensive description of the biography of Iqbal Masih, a Pakistani child labourer who later became a prominent activist for the elimination of child slavery. Through Iqbal's profile, the author describes the challenging relationship between poverty and child labour. She shows how the economy can contribute to segregation within

society. The life of Iqbal Masih and the views of Marxism are deeply related. His life working against child slavery can be seen as highlighting ideologies and insights in the context of Marxism.

According to Marxism, class conflict in society represents the rivalry between two social hierarchies: the Bourgeoisie, identified as the capitalist class, and the Proletariat, identified as the working class. The capitalist class owns factories, enjoys profits, and often violates the rights of workers, while the working class labours in the factories, contributing their effort and lives to production, but the profits are enjoyed by others (Parsons). The selected figure, Iqbal Masih, falls in the proletariat class, forced to labour for long hours and for a very meagre wage. His hard work ultimately made his *thakedar* increasingly wealthy. This point parallels the exploitation in a capitalist society. As Iqbal stated in the book:

“My parents were helpless. Our family was very poor, and low-class people are not in a position to do anything. So, I personally did not ask anything of my family.” (Kuklin 55)

Marx argued that the labouring class is more likely to become alienated under the system of capitalism (Petrović). Iqbal Masih, whose education and childhood were taken from him, illustrates alienation and emphasizes the dehumanizing traits of child labour. As the book notes:

“At night he was driven back to his family. He was too tired to play his favorite sport, cricket. ‘I didn’t have time to play ball,’ he explained later.” (Kuklin 25)

Marxism analyses the decline of labour into a mere service and commodity bought and sold in the market. Young labourers are enslaved in debt and exemplify their existence as commodities of cheap labour.

“Iqbal Masih was one of the millions of children all over the world who fill their days working to help their impoverished families pay off debts or eke out a small living.” (Kuklin 11)

The short lifespan of Iqbal Masih as a child labour activist focused on rescuing children trapped by chains of slavery and oppression. The fight for liberation by Iqbal Masih parallels proletarian liberation in Marxism, which projects liberation through systematic change and revolution (Parry).

“Iqbal said that he could not be free unless everyone was free.” (Kuklin 62)

The life story of Iqbal Masih and the ideology of Marxism resonate with the core criticism of capitalism. His struggle highlights the alienation, commodification, and exploitation of labour inherent to the system.

One of the most prominent ways the economy separates the social order is by creating an outsized lower class of individuals who are unable to achieve their essential needs such as housing. The history of Iqbal Masih is a dreadful example. Iqbal was forced to labour in a workplace from the young age of four years. He was subjected to physical and emotional exploitation at the hands of the factory master.

“Under the terms of the peshgi, Iqbal was to weave carpets six days a week, twelve hours a day, until he worked off the 600-rupee loan.” (Kuklin 20)

The international economic system can also affect segregation by developing a system of winners and losers. Businesses transfer manufacturing to places where the cost of labour is low, regardless of environmental or social consequences. This creates a vicious cycle of inequality and poverty that furthers segregation and exploitation of labourers.

Regarding child labour, the international economy plays a vital role by sustaining demand for low-priced goods. Consumers in industrialized countries are often blind to the human cost of production, concerned only with price. This creates a market for goods made by children and encourages companies to exploit them to keep costs down.

“Unfortunately, the owner of the business where I worked told us that it is America who asks us to enslave the children.” (Kuklin 10). This is confirmed by U.S. Senator Tom Harkin’s remarks:

“It was not so long ago that we outlawed child labor in this country, and for good reason. America decided kids should spend their time in school, not in sweatshops.” (Kuklin 64). Segregation of society is therefore an intricate issue. By creating a large class unable to meet basic needs and fostering a system of winners and losers, the economy contributes to entrenched inequality (Leal and Sorando).

Iqbal Masih’s battle against child slavery shows the dual nature of the economy: on one side, it sustains exploitation, while on the other, it provides a platform for global awareness. At only five, he escaped the carpet factory and joined the Bonded Labour Liberation Front (BLLF). There, he quickly rose to prominence, travelling internationally, raising awareness, and supporting the creation of schools for freed children. His efforts pressured authorities to act. In 1994, he was even nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize. Sadly, in 1995, he was murdered at the age of 12 (Kuklin 62). Examples of his activism include motivating students abroad:

“Inspired by Iqbal’s visit, they had canvassed the neighborhood and got people to write 656 letters protesting child bondage.” (Kuklin 83). He became a global role model, proving emancipation possible. His courage earned him the Reebok Youth in Action Award:

“Iqbal Masih, leader, inspiration, giant: we honor you with the Reebok Youth in Action Award.” (Kuklin 85). Even after his death, his legacy continued. Swedish students established “Youth Against Slavery” and “Children Against Slavery,” celebrating April 16 as Iqbal Day.

The Basu-Van model explains that child labour stems from poverty: parents send children to work because survival requires their earnings, a “subsistence trap.” The Luxury Axiom similarly holds that parents only send children to work if household income falls below subsistence level (Fan). Iqbal’s case reflects both theories. His uncle borrowed 600 rupees, forcing him into bonded labour:

“Little Iqbal would weave carpets until all the money, including an undisclosed amount of interest and expenses, was paid back.” (Kuklin 19)

This shows that poverty, not parental choice, caused his exploitation. The effects on Iqbal were devastating: abuse, lack of education, and illness.

“Even sick children were not allowed to rest... the chowkidar locked him in a dark closet known as the punishment room.” (Kuklin 26). Ultimately, he escaped and became a symbol of resistance:

“Iqbal Masih has become a symbol of the many children who work as modern-day slaves.” (Kuklin 14)

The story of Iqbal Masih is a heart-breaking demonstration of the dehumanizing effects of child labour. It also serves as a call to combat exploitation and safeguard children’s rights worldwide. His life illustrates how Marxist concepts of class conflict, alienation, and commodification, combined with economic theories like the Basu-Van model and Luxury Axiom, help explain why child labour persists. His legacy continues to inspire global efforts for justice.

CONCLUSION

This study has investigated the life of a young Pakistani boy, Iqbal Masih, who became an embodiment of opposition and resistance against child labour, using the lens of Marxism. Through the analysis of Susan Kuklin’s *Iqbal Masih and the Crusaders Against Child Slavery*, the research examined the social and economic structures that perpetuate child labour and the struggles faced by marginalized communities.

The exploration revealed the pervasive exploitation of children in Pakistani factories. The story of Iqbal Masih represents the plight of countless children forced to labour in unsafe environments, stripped of education, health, and childhood. Using Marxist class analysis, this research demonstrated how the economy divided society into two classes: the bourgeoisie, represented by factory owners, and the proletariat, represented by poor families compelled to send their children into bonded labour for survival. Economic inequalities fuel class conflict, with Iqbal and other child labourers, desiring stability and basic rights, embodying the oppressed class.

The courage of Iqbal Masih in escaping child enslavement and supporting other ill-treated children highlights the significance of class consciousness. His activism demonstrates how ordinary individuals can resist and overcome systemic oppression. The “Luxury Axiom” and “Basu-Van” theories further explain how poverty and economic necessity sustain child labour. Poverty remains central: when adult wages are insufficient, families often resort to sending their children to work as a survival mechanism.

Iqbal’s life functions as a powerful inspiration for child workers around the world. His determination and willpower showed that change is possible, even in the harshest conditions. The tragic death of Iqbal Masih silenced his voice but

strengthened his legacy, which continues to shape global movements against child labour. His story calls on us to collectively resist exploitation and ensure equal opportunities for all children to reach their full potential. This research also opens the way for further literary and socio-economic studies on child labour.

In conclusion, the story of Iqbal Masih stands as a powerful reminder of the human cost of child labour. By understanding the social structures and economic barriers that sustain exploitation, we can collectively work toward a more equitable and just world in which every child has the opportunity to flourish.

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