



ISSN 2455-7544
www.daathvoyagejournal.com

Daath Voyage : An International Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies in English

A Peer Reviewed, Refereed, Indexed & Open Access
Vol.10/No.2 June 2025

Editor: Dr. Saikat Banerjee



www.daathvoyagejournal.com

: An International Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies in English
(A Peer Reviewed, Refereed, Indexed & Open Access Journal)

ISSN 2455-7544

Vol.10/No.2, June, 2025

Glass Ceilings and Gazing Eyes: Gender Commodification in Ravi Subramanian's *If God Was a Banker*

Uma

Research Scholar

Department of English & Foreign Languages,
Chaudhary Devi Lal University, Sirsa

&

Anu Shukla

Professor

Department of English & Foreign Languages,
Chaudhary Devi Lal University, Sirsa

Email: garguma28@gmail.com

Received- 08/05/2025, Revised-05/06/2025, Accepted-19/06/2025, Published-30/06/2025.

Abstract: The present paper tries to examine the commodification of gender in the corporate surroundings as depicted in Ravi Subramanian's novel *If God Was a Banker*. Drawing on various theoretical frameworks such as Judith Butler's concept of gender performativity, Martha Nussbaum's theory of objectification, Marilyn Loden's "glass ceiling" and Rosabeth Moss Kanter's concept of 'Token' Women, the study analyzes how organizational culture perpetuates systemic gender discrimination. The research explores gendered experiences in the male-dominated corporate structures through contrasting leadership styles presented through two key characters of the novel, Sundeep and Swami. By analyzing the representation and experiences of female characters at various hierarchical levels within the organization, this paper tries to unveil the mechanisms through which women are reduced to their physical attributes, denied autonomy, and subjected to sexual harassment. This literary analysis of the commodification of gender through insights from Subramanian's novel contributes to revealing how contemporary Indian literature engages with and critiques the objectification of women at workplace.

Keywords: Gendered organization, objectification, glass ceiling, corporate hierarchy, workplace harassment.

Judith Butler, in her renowned book, *Gender Trouble* proclaimed that gender is not biologically fixed, rather it is constructed. The division of roles, initially considered biological, is being deemed a social creation by various philosophers. Butler has given the concept of gender performativity based on the concept of performative language by J L Austin. She argues that both men and women do not perform specific actions or behave in a certain way because of their physical strength or constituents. Instead, society labels them to perform that very action as soon as they are born. Thus, this division of jobs based on gender is performative

and not biological or inherent. This social division of labour only widens the gap between the two genders. The segregation of people under titles and assigning them specific jobs, limits their potential. It creates a sense of inferiority that takes more than just time and skills to break. The social stigma associated with doing tasks that belong to the 'other' gender is one such barrier. The roles assigned to women become a mode of their exploitation. Ever since women have tried to break the barriers, the social structure has challenged their efforts.

Organisations, like many other spheres of work, have been dominated by the male gender since times immemorial. Many feminist and organisational culture theorists have tried to unearth and explore the gendered nature of the organisations. One of the most promising accounts comes from Joan Acker. In her article, "Hierarchies, Jobs, Bodies: A Theory of Gendered Organizations", Acker rejects the argument that organisations are gender neutral. She argues that division of labour, corporate hierarchies, and expectations reflect socially constructed gender roles. She further explains processes through which organizations are gendered. The first one is division of labour according to gender, such as, men as managers and women as secretaries. The second is the construction of symbols that are embedded in culture. Technical skills are often linked to masculinity which leads to the interdiction of women in such jobs. The third is interaction where men act, and women are envisaged as emotional support providing agency. The fourth one is individual identity which is often reflected through one's choice of clothing and other such factors. The last one is ongoing creation and conceptualization of social structures which create a gendered identity. This process of gendering leads to masculine dominion by creating the discourse of the ideal worker. Masculinity is favored for being skilled, available, committed, and typically free from domestic responsibilities. The male domination not only acts as a barrier to the entry of women in organizations, but it also makes it difficult for them to survive in that environment. The dominant group makes the rules and creates an atmosphere suitable for themselves evading the question of suitability of women workers. While the aesthetic of capitalism often glamorizes the corporate world and its various forms of communication; both fiction and nonfiction are increasingly revealing its clandestine realities. Writers like Ravi Subramanian attempt to expose the inherent reality through their fictional stories. With years of experience working in the banking sector, the author explores multifarious aspects of the corporate world through gripping tales. The aim of the research is to

explore gender commodification at the workplace by taking insights from his book *If God Was a Banker*. The novel is the story of two Indian Institute of Management (IIM) graduates who make their way to the top of a reputed banking organization. The plot revolves around Sundeep and Swami, two management trainees who become part of a rapidly expanding business, bringing them the desired money and fame. The writer explores the lives of female characters through the contrasting personalities of these two characters as leaders. The present research focuses on studying the lives of women at various stages in the banking industry in the novel taken up for investigation. The study analyzes the impact of corporate culture and leaders in shaping female workplace experience.

Women have made their entry into the service sector way back and, with time, many issues have been fought while a lot many are yet to be taken up. The world has witnessed the maladies of women who have endured immense pain for ages to get where they are today. However, even after fighting through it all and proving their worth, women struggle to be considered just human beings as their male counterparts. They are still treated as objects that can be used, transacted, manipulated and thrown away when not required. Karl Marx in his *Das Capital* states that, “a commodity is, in the first place, an object outside us, a thing that by its properties satisfies human wants of some sort or another” (437). The women in the novel become the object of male satisfaction through the tools of gaze and sexual harassment. In the beginning of the novel, Sundeep addresses Kalpana as “... PYT (pretty young thing) sitting in a row ahead of him” (Subramanian 19). He also addresses Karuna, the wife of one of his subordinates, in a similar way as he utters “Kya cheez hai yaaaaar!” for her (146). In her article “Objectification”, Martha Nussbaum gives seven features that identify the treatment of women as objects. The features include instrumentality, denial of autonomy, inertness, fungibility, violability, ownership, and denial of subjectivity (257). In the novel, when Ram Naresh introduces Sundeep to his secretaries, all these features come into the picture. “You haven't met my secretary, right,’ said Naresh, as if the secretary was a piece of art” (Subramanian 78). His secretaries dress attractively and have only one job to do, which is to seduce his acquaintances. He acts like an owner of these girls, as if they are just some commodities displayed in his office shelf and has no respect for them. He uses his secretaries as interchangeable objects by offering their services in return for other favors. This is what Igor Kopytoff describes as commodification when he states, “A commodity is a thing that has use value and that can be

exchanged in a discrete transaction for a counterpart, the very fact of exchange indicating that counterpart has, in the immediate context, an equivalent value”(68). He further adds that, “In fact, of course, saleability for money is not a necessary feature of commodity status, given the existence of commodity exchange in non-monetary economics”(69). Naresh uses his secretary as a commodity or mode of transaction to secure a business deal with Sundeep’s organization. Sundeep realizes that, “by sending Monica to him, Naresh had bought him for life. He had got a good deal from New York International Bank. And now he had ensured that the deal was his forever”. Men who sexually objectify women have no emotional bond with them. In his *Lectures on Ethics*, Kant says, “In loving from sexual inclination, they make the person into an object of their appetite. As soon as the person is possessed, and the appetite sated, they are thrown away, as one throws away a lemon after sucking the juice from it” (156). It is evident in the text that Sundeep is not emotionally attached to any of his multiple office affairs. He loved the pride that came with having so many women under his control. “He felt no emotional connection with Karuna, just the massive ego kick of bedding a lovely, married woman. Making love to her made him feel like God—the God of Banking” (Subramanian 172-3). In an article published in Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, Mari Mikkola suggests that “...men have been conditioned to find women’s subordination sexy....” In the case of Sundeep, the subordination acts like an ointment to his ego.

Women are always expected to adjust, put in more effort, and, in short, do more than is required to prove their worth. At times, they need more than just skills to prove their point. In entry-level jobs, their appearance holds more weight than their caliber. This positioning of women as the objects of male desire is what Laura Mulvey terms ‘Male gaze’ in her essay “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema”. Subramanian exposes how the bank, though at the initiation, follows an unbiased hiring procedure, but changes rules when bosses like Sundeep get the authority. Naresh suggests Sundeep to hire based on T & A (tits and ass) criteria. While Sundeep seems unaware of any such thing before Ram mentions it, the idea surely affects his hiring process, filling his team with pretty faces with average or no skills to fulfil his lust. The question that arises here is who has granted him that authority and control to carry out his nefarious plans? Perhaps it is the absence of women's voices in corporate spaces or the dominance of a patriarchal mindset that gives a man the liberty to treat a woman as an object.

In corporations, the secretarial job is usually assigned to women. Women are considered suitable for the position since it is a role that requires a submissive attitude. In her book *Men and Women of the Corporation*, Rosabeth Moss discusses the marriage metaphor associated with the job. The treatment of the secretary as an 'Office Wife', a derogatory term attributed to them, involves the expectation of personal favours. It can include emotional bonding as well as doing tasks that wives do at home. A character in the novel, Natasha, is Suneel's secretary but the personal favours Suneel expects from her go beyond making coffee, extending to sexual favours which he assumes she will comply with silently. At an official party, he tries to touch her inappropriately under the pretext of dancing, and when she confides in her husband, Sundeep, he dismisses her emotions, saying she is just overreacting. When Suneel cannot use her, he just dismisses her as if she was not a human being but an object. Later in the novel, it is visible that even Sundeep tries to molest his secretary, who eventually leaves the job. Reena quits because of his advances, which she mentions clearly in her resignation letter. However, Sundeep changes the letter and submits a fake interview report with her without even conducting one. The authority and subsequent power that Sundeep holds because no one was there to question his actions, makes him grow more and more confident with such things.

In the novel, the global headquarters has set up a women helpline cell to make sure women feel safe in the organization. The senior HR manager at the headquarters, Mitchelle, analyzes that sexual harassment complaints from the Indian branch are following a pattern and have a common name. Complaints from various women, all accusing Sundeep, keep piling up, prompting officials at the headquarters to plan a sudden audit. Mona Albance arrives under the pretence of conducting a routine internal audit, but unbeknownst to the staff, she is on a secret mission to gather unfiltered evidence. For that purpose, she conducts interviews with various women and analyses the ratio of women at different levels in the organization. While the ratio seems neutral initially, a drastic drop in the number of women in certain fields and higher positions is evident. When Mona discusses with Karuna about the disparity in women's participation in front-line jobs and senior positions, Karuna asserts that this is more cultural than personal preference. She says, "They at times lack the opportunity and the drive to go ahead in their careers. Family pressures, an archaic male-dominated society lead to several women giving up their careers for the sake of their families" (Subramanian 213). On being probed further, Karuna expresses her discontent over the unequal treatment of men and women in Indian

society. She goes on to say, “Why outside, within our organisation, do we treat men and women as equals? We do not.” (213). It is evident that the limitation of women’s work sphere to desk jobs is not just a cultural or personal preference; in fact, it has more to do with the organizational environment. In further discussion, Karuna says:

‘So many times, women lose out on senior positions because someone senior says, "Forget it, she is married, and she will not be able to give it her best." Or "She will not be able to travel to the extent we want her to and so she will not be able to deliver." We have created a glass ceiling that is very difficult for any woman to break out of. How many women are there in our own management committee?’ (213-4)

Organizational culture is evolved for the suitability of men. Since men have been the primary job takers, the culture continues to cater to their needs. In an atmosphere solely designed for men and their comfort, they expect women to work and deliver like men. Subsequently, when they expect a slight change, they are shamed and stereotyped. Instead of giving them space to grow, these stereotypes make them feel what they have is more than what they deserve. They blame women for being unable to fit in or being too demanding. Women are stereotyped under labels, as stated by Karuna and that is where the concept of the glass ceiling comes into the picture. The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines the “glass ceiling” as “an intangible barrier within a hierarchy that prevents women or minorities from obtaining upper-level positions.” According to an article published on BBC News, Marilyn Loden coined the term in 1978 during a panel discussion. The discussion was centered on the aspirations of women and led to a criticism of female employees by fellow panelists. Loden used the term “Glass Ceiling” to talk about the invisible cultural barriers. She states that “True, women did seem unable to climb the career ladder beyond the lowest rung of middle management, but I argued that the "invisible glass ceiling" - the barriers to advancement that were cultural not personal - was doing the bulk of the damage to women's career aspirations and opportunities.”

The stereotypes associated with women rob them of many opportunities, and even if they get a place in a higher organization, they do not get the deserved recognition. Many a time, those in higher positions are treated as tokens. Kanter gave this concept of ‘token’ to talk about women who were included in higher management just to improve the gender ratio which in most of the organizations is just a façade to veil the

gender inequalities mushrooming within. She explains how either these women themselves do not try to talk against their counterparts, or they do not have the support to voice their opinions. Being a minority, their opinions do not make much of a difference until their male counterparts come in their support. The only woman of influence in the bank is Sharda Ranjan. And it is surprising to see that someone as established as her lures Sundeep with a “full-service date” if he manages to achieve a target for her. Since junior employees in the organization cannot rely on such women for support during critical situations, she serves merely as a token figure, present only to balance the gender ratio. In contrast, women like Naina Lal Kidwai, an influential corporate leader at another bank, become role models for female employees. Karuna wishes that Naina Lal Kidwai worked with their bank because deep down she believes that having a strong woman at the management level may make things easier for the women at junior levels.

However, circumstances change for the better for the women employees when Swami replaces Sundeep. He even sets up a helpline number with his wife Kalpana, where everyone can report any wrongdoing in the company without being exposed. The positive change reflects when Mona plays a game called QAG (Quick Answer Game). QAG has a rule where participants have to answer the question the host asks within 5 seconds, leaving very little time to cook answers. It helps bring out answers from the subconscious, and that is the real intent of Mona. When she asks Priya, “One word which would describe how the bank has changed in the past two years.” (Subramanian 218), Priya answers ‘Safer’ taking everyone in shock. However, the answer shows the positive change Swami’s authority brings to the organization. The whole plot of the book, especially this particular incident, shows how a man in power can make life hell or heaven for his subordinates. Sundeep forces Priya to get into a relationship with him and assaults her physically as well as mentally. All this goes on to such a large extent that Priya’s husband divorces her, and the family breaks because of someone’s lust. In the end, the predicaments of the victims improve when their complaints against Sundeep are heard and consequently he is fired from the job. All this becomes possible because there are women like Michelle as a senior HR manager, and Mona Albance as a diversity head at the global headquarters who consider women’s complaints seriously and act upon accordingly to resolve their problems through a secret plan of audit.

In conclusion, the novel *If God Was a Banker* by Ravi Subramanian serves as a stark reflection of the objectification and marginalization of women in corporate environments. We may have come a long way, we may be said to have progressed, we may be living in the post feminism era, the corporate world may be a part of the advanced metropolitan culture, the truth is that women employees in the flashiest of organizations are still considered below par their male counterparts. The novel highlights how male-dominated corporate cultures treat women as objects and create a glass ceiling that hinders their growth and diminishes their contributions. Theories like Butler's gender performativity, Acker's gendered organizations and Nussbaum's objectification reveal that the corporate world often mirrors societal norms that reinforce gender roles.

Ultimately, the novel underscores the need for systemic change in corporate structures to ensure that women are not just included but respected and valued for their contributions. It calls for a shift in organizational culture, where leaders like Swami, who prioritize safety and equality, can pave the way for a more inclusive and equitable workplace. Including more women like Mona Albance is required so that these women in power can challenge the status quo. The fight against the objectification of women in the workplace is ongoing, and this novel serves as a reminder of the challenges that remain and the importance of continued efforts to achieve true gender equality.

Works Cited

- Acker, Joan. "Hierarchies, Jobs, Bodies: A Theory of Gendered Organizations." *Gender & Society*, vol. 4, no. 2, 1990, pp. 139-158.
- BBC News. "100 Women: "Why I Invented the Glass Ceiling Phrase." 13 Dec. 2017, www.bbc.com/news/world-42026266.
- Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and Subversion of Identity*. Routledge, 1990.
- "Glass Ceiling." *Merriam-Webster Dictionary*. www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/glass%20ceiling. Accessed 14 July 2024.
- Kant, Immanuel. *Lectures on Ethics*. Edited and translated by Peter Heath, Cambridge University Press, 1997.
- Kanter, Rosabeth Moss. *Men and Women of the Corporation*. Basic Books, 1977.



www.daathvoyagejournal.com

: An International Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies in English
(A Peer Reviewed, Refereed, Indexed & Open Access Journal)

ISSN 2455-7544

Vol.10/No.2, June, 2025

- Kopytoff, Igor. "The Cultural Biography of Things: Commoditization as Process." *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*, edited by Arjun Appadurai, Cambridge University Press, 1986, pp. 64–91.
- Marx, Karl. *The Portable Marx*. Edited by Eugene Kamenka, Penguin Books, 1983.
- Mikkola, Mari. "Feminist Perspectives on Sex and Gender." *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, edited by Edward N. Zalta, Stanford University, 2019, plato.stanford.edu/entries/feminism-gender/#toc.
- Mulvey, Laura. "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema." *Screen*, vol. 16, no. 3, 1975, pp. 6–18.
- Nussbaum, Martha. "Objectification." *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, pp. 249-291, 1995.
- Subramanian, Ravi. *If God Was a Banker*. Rupa Publications, 2007.