

Scorching Suburbia: A Marxist Critique of Hegemony, Commodification, and Class Struggle in Celeste Ng's *Little Fires Everywhere*

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Abstract:

This paper offers a Marxist literary analysis of Celeste Ng's *Little Fires Everywhere* (2017), presenting the novel as a critique of capitalist hegemony, ideological control, and class struggle. The planned community of Shaker Heights is examined as a microcosm of the capitalist superstructure, where wealth and property ownership shape the social, moral, and legal systems of the town. By analyzing characters through their socioeconomic positions, the study highlights exploitation and alienation within capitalist society. Mrs. Richardson represents the bourgeoisie and uses economic power, charity, and social influence to maintain control. In contrast, Mia Warren represents the proletariat and functions as an organic intellectual, a concept developed by Antonio Gramsci. Mia challenges dominant values by rejecting materialism and resisting the commodification of her labor and body. The paper argues that the novel shows true freedom cannot exist within a rigid capitalist system and calls for dismantling inequality to value human experience over profit.

Keywords: Marxist Literary Theory, Commodification, Organic Intellectual, Class Struggle, Bourgeoisie, Proletariat

Introduction

Celeste Ng is an acclaimed American author. She is known for her nuanced exploration of family dynamics, race, and the complex underbelly of suburban life. Building on the success of her best-selling novel, *Everything I Never Told You*, she published a highly celebrated second work, *Little Fires Everywhere*, in 2017. Ng sets this compelling narrative in Shaker Heights, Ohio, a meticulously planned, affluent community originally built on the utopian ideals of order, regulation, and aesthetic harmony. In Shaker Heights, success is expected, and the community operates on the fundamental belief that by planning every detail, residents can avoid the unpleasant or disastrous aspects of life.

The novel revolves around the collision of two starkly different families. On one side are the Richardsons, who are a perfect embodiment of Shaker Heights. Mrs. Richardson, a journalist for the local paper, and her husband, a successful attorney, have four teenage children: Lexie, Trip, Moody, and rebellious Izzy. The Richardsons live a life of comfort, immense privilege, and strict adherence to societal rules. This orderly existence is disrupted by the arrival of Mia Warren and her fifteen-year-old daughter, Pearl, who rent a duplex from the Richardsons. Mia is an enigmatic, nomadic artist who takes part-time jobs to support her creative projects, keeping her possessions to a bare minimum as she continuously moves her daughter from town to town.

The families quickly become entangled when the Richardson children grow fascinated by the Warrens' unconventional lifestyle, and Pearl becomes secretly captivated by Mrs. Richardson's stability, wealth, and easy confidence. However, deep ideological tensions eventually boil over when a fierce custody battle erupts in the community. The conflict centers on a Chinese infant named May Ling, who was left at a fire station by a destitute immigrant mother. The baby is adopted by Mrs. Richardson's close friend, the wealthy white McCullough family, who are themselves struggling to form an adoptive family. When Bebe discovers her child's whereabouts through Mia, she fights to regain custody, sparking a highly public legal and moral battle. This custody dispute divides the entire town and irrevocably fractures the relationship between Mr. and Mrs. Richardson, driven by her loyalty to the McCulloughs and her deep-seated suspicion of Mia's rule-breaking, bohemian lifestyle. Using her investigative journalism skills, Mrs. Richardson begins to ruthlessly dig into Mia's secretive past, and the narrative ultimately opens with the dramatic aftermath of these mounting tensions. The Richardson family home is being incinerated by the youngest daughter, Izzy, leaving little fires everywhere.

The Bourgeoisie and the Agent of Cultural Hegemony

In Marxist literary theory, society is divided primarily into two classes: the bourgeoisie, which is the ruling class that owns the wealth and means of production, and the proletariat, the working class whose only capital is their labor. Mrs. Richardson represents the bourgeoisie. She operates within the framework of hegemony, a concept developed by Marxist philosopher Antonio Gramsci. Hegemony describes how the ruling class maintains control not through physical force, but by establishing its cultural, moral, and ideological values as the natural, common-sense norm for society. Mrs. Richardson utilizes her economic power and social standing to enforce these norms on those she considers beneath her.

In one incident, this is clearly seen when Mrs. Richardson owns a second home, an independent duplex on Windsor Road. Because she is extremely wealthy and does not actually need the rental income to survive, she views the role of a landlord as a philanthropic endeavor, carefully selecting tenants whom she believes are deserving of her help. This mindset is explicitly revealed when the narrator notes, "She kept the rent low... and she rented only to people she felt were deserving but who had, for one reason or another, not quite

gotten a fair shot in life. It pleased her to make up the difference” (Ng 24). Through a Marxist lens, this dynamic exposes the subtle exploitation inherent in capitalist class relationships. By owning the means of production, in this case, real estate and shelter, Mrs. Richardson holds immense structural power over tenants. She frames her actions as benevolent charity, but this paternalism is a classic bourgeois tool to legitimize and perpetuate her own authority as a result of this advantage. By deciding who is deserving of a home, she wields ultimate socioeconomic authority, dictating the lives of the proletariat while convincing herself of her own moral superiority. This allows the ruling class to maintain power while feeling righteous despite the inequality they benefit from.

Following this, Mrs. Richardson, fascinated and slightly unsettled by Mia's worldly, unconventional nomadic lifestyle, offers Mia a job as a part-time housekeeper. She frames this offer as a favor to give Mia more time for her art, but she secretly desires to keep a watchful eye on her. This dynamic is evident when she suggests, “Wouldn't that be perfect... You could come just for a few hours a day and do a little light housekeeping. I'd pay you for your time, of course. And then you'd have all the rest of your day to take pictures” (Ng 94). This incident demonstrates the Marxist concept of commodification and the extraction of surplus value. The situation converts Mia's physical labor and time into a commodity that can be purchased. This acts as a mechanism of social control by bringing Mia into the home as a domestic servant. This situation asserts class dominance and physically places Mia in a subordinated role within the bourgeois household. As Terry Eagleton argues:

The transformation of the individual into a commodity is not merely a financial transaction but a social one that reinforces the existing class hierarchy. By integrating the worker into the domestic sphere, the bourgeois household enacts a physical manifestation of surplus value extraction, where the laborer's very presence is subordinated to the structural needs of the capitalist hegemony. This absorption serves to neutralize potential resistance by tethering the marginalized subject to the dominant mode of production. (Eagleton 84)

Marxist criticism asserts that the dominant class will always attempt to absorb or control alternative non-capitalist lifestyles to neutralize any threats to their hegemony. Unlike Mrs. Richardson, Mia Warren embodies the proletariat, the working class who must continuously sell their physical labor to survive under capitalism. However, Mia is not just a passive victim of the system; she operates as what Antonio Gramsci termed an “organic intellectual” (Boggs 42). An organic intellectual is an individual who emerges from the working or oppressed classes and who possesses the critical consciousness to challenge the dominant hegemony, offering alternative narratives and resisting capitalist norms.

Mia and her daughter Pearl live a nomadic existence, moving from town to town out of their battered Volkswagen Rabbit. Rather than striving for homeownership, savings, or material goods, Mia purchases thrift-store clothes, scavenges furniture from curbsides, and

works low-wage, part-time jobs specifically so she can dedicate her primary focus to her art. This alternative value system is evident when the narrator explains, “They traveled lightly: two plates and two cups and a handful of mismatched silverware... For as long as she could remember, Pearl had understood the hierarchy: her mother’s real work was her art, and whatever paid the bills existed only to make that art possible” (Ng 45). This rejection of material accumulation and prioritization of creative labor reflects Mia’s resistance to capitalist norms and aligns with her role as an organic intellectual who challenges dominant definitions of success.

In Marxist theory, the economic base, that is, the mode of production and capital, shapes the superstructure, which is culture, art, and beliefs. The bourgeoisie expects individuals to prioritize capital accumulation above all else. Mia subversively reverses this structure. She actively rejects the capitalist drive for wealth and property. She refuses to let economic determinism rule her consciousness. Her art exists completely outside the capitalist pursuit of profit. She destroys negatives, alters prints, and refuses to mass-produce her work for syndication. She represents a profound threat to the Shaker Heights bourgeoisie because her existence proves that human value and fulfillment can exist entirely independent of wealth and socioeconomic status.

This incident further illustrates the dynamics of class exploitation. Before Pearl was born, a young and destitute Mia lost her art school scholarship. Desperate for tuition money, she agreed to act as a surrogate mother for a wealthy Wall Street couple, the Ryans, who offered her \$10,000 to carry the child. This is a harrowing example of extreme capitalist exploitation and alienation. Because Mia lacks capital, she is forced to sell the only thing she has left: her own biological reproductive capacity to the Ryans. The Ryans represent the ultra-wealthy bourgeoisie who use their vast capital to materially purchase a female proletarian body as an incubator. As Silvia Federici argues:

The surrogate’s body is thus transformed into a site of production where the biological processes of gestation are alienated from the woman and subsumed under the logic of capital. In this framework, the contract masks the inherent inequality of the exchange, recharacterizing the commodification of reproductive labor as a mutually beneficial transaction while reinforcing the structural dominance of the purchasing class over the dispossessed body of the laborer (Federici 92).

The phrase “mutual growth” is a sinister capitalist justification that attempts to mask the profound imbalance of power. When Mia eventually flees with the baby, it is an act of ultimate counter-hegemony. She breaks the capitalist contract, reclaiming her body, her labor, and her child from the ruling class that sought to purchase her humanity.

Conclusion

Examining Celeste Ng's *Little Fires Everywhere* through the lens of Marxist literary criticism transforms the understanding of the novel from a simple suburban drama into a profound critique of capitalist hegemony, class struggle, and ideological control. The meticulously planned community of Shaker Heights functions as a perfect mechanism of the capitalist superstructure, wherein the economic base, capitalist wealth, property ownership, and material conditions, strictly dictate the social, legal, and moral institutions of the town.

By analyzing the novel's characters according to their socioeconomic positions, Celeste Ng illustrates the inherent exploitation and alienation within a capitalist society. Mrs. Richardson perfectly embodies the bourgeoisie and acts as an enforcer of cultural hegemony. However, in stark contrast, Mia Warren is different. Mia emerges as what Antonio Gramsci termed an organic intellectual. By actively refusing to commodify her art to conform to the bourgeois expectations of society, Mia mounts a resistance against the hegemonic order. She cultivates a counter-hegemonic worldview that values creative labor and authentic human experience over the relentless, alienating pursuit of profit. Through this Marxist framework, *Little Fires Everywhere* reveals that true emancipation cannot be found within the confines of an oppressive, heavily regulated capitalist system. As a final act of resistance, Mia dismantles deeply entrenched socioeconomic inequities, symbolically setting fire to dominant ideologies and scorching artificial perfection to the ground so that a more authentic, equitable reality might grow from its ashes.

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