

CHAPTER II

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1. Intrinsic Elements

2.1.1 Character and Characterization

Within literary studies, a character functions as an imagined figure in a narrative whom the audience perceives as having distinct ethical, cognitive, and affective traits. Readers can understand these qualities by inferring from what the characters say and how they act. The main character, commonly referred to as the protagonist, is the central figure who captures the reader's attention through their actions and conflicts, and is directly involved in the core conflict that drives the plot. According to Holman and Harmon (1986:81), characters serve as a crucial medium through which authors express broader themes and moral ideas within a literary work.

Characterization is the method used by the author to illustrate the personality and defining attributes of the figures within the story. According to Holman and Harmon (1986:83), characterization is a technique used by writers to introduce and develop characters in literary work. This process can be done explicitly, where the writer or narrator directly describes the qualities, traits, or roles of the characters, or implicitly, where the character's personality is revealed gradually through dialogue, actions, thoughts, or interactions with others.

2.1.2 Setting

Setting is a basic element of fiction that constructs the reality in which characters exist, and events unfold. A narrative cannot be understood without knowing where and when it takes place, since setting shapes the environment, mood, and conditions that surround the storyline. Holman and Harmon (1986:465) state that setting is not merely a background, but consists of the physical surroundings, the time of the narrative, and the social environment that shapes the lives of the characters. Within this framework, setting is classified into three aspects. The setting of place refers to the geographical location and physical surroundings, such as buildings, landscapes, or interiors that establish the atmosphere of the story. The setting of time situates the story within a specific moment or historical period. The setting of social environment encompasses social norms, cultural practices, and economic conditions that influence characters' behavior and interactions. In this study, these elements are important not only as background, but as factors that shape the pressures and conflicts faced by the main character. In this study, the setting is more than just a backdrop. It actively drives the characters' actions. The harsh physical environment, pressing time, and difficult economic conditions work together to influence the characters' behavior. Ultimately, this setting limits the characters' choices, creates the main conflict, and forces them to take risky actions just to survive.

2.1.3 Conflict

Conflict is a fundamental element in fiction because it fuels the plot and motivates characters to act and change. According to Holman and Harmon

(1986:107), conflict refers to a struggle between opposing forces that may involve mental, emotional, or physical tension and can take internal or external forms. They further distinguish internal conflicts, which occur within a character and involve psychological or moral dilemmas, while external conflicts involve other individuals, society, or the environment. This internal conflict reflects the character's attempt to understand the self, while external conflict shows the character's confrontation with the world around them. As Holman and Harmon (1986:108) explain, conflict structures the plot and leads the story toward its climax. In addition, it reveals the theme and shows how characters change through the process of resolving tension.

2.2. Marxist Literary Theory

2.2.1 Marxist Theory

Formulated in the nineteenth century by Karl Marx alongside Friedrich Engels, Marxist theory examines society through class relations, economic forces, and power structures. The fundamental premise of this theory is that the structure of society is built upon its economic base, which then shapes the social, political, and cultural superstructure (Marx, 1867:175). Within this framework, the bourgeoisie secures its superiority over the proletariat through the monopolization of productive resources and the continuous extraction of labor power.

Within this framework, economic determinism refers to the idea that material economic conditions influence all aspects of human life, including literature and art. Eagleton (2000:34) argues that the economic relationship between classes not only drives societal development but also sustains the values, norms,

and ideologies that support the capitalist system. Furthermore, Eagleton (2000:12) adds that the Marxist literary criticism examines how literary texts reflect, reinforce, or challenge existing social and economic conditions. Thus, literature functions not only as artistic expression, but also as a space where class struggle and social inequality are represented and critically engaged.

2.2.2 Exploitation in Marx's Theory

According to Marx (1867:45), exploitation is a fundamental element of the capitalist system, propelled by the appropriation of surplus value. This concept shows the disparity dividing the total economic worth created by the proletariat and the basic subsistence pay they ultimately collect. Since workers lack ownership of productive resources, they must commodify their labor capacity in order to survive, yet they have no control over the products of their labor. This creates a structural imbalance in which the value generated by the proletariat is accumulated by those who possess the productive assets.

As Eagleton (2000:16) notes, this structural imbalance is a systemic form of coercion that extends far beyond traditional wage labor. Within this broader capitalist framework, the extraction of wealth often extends to the privatization of basic public resources, functioning as a continuous accumulation by dispossession. Furthermore, this structural exploitation essentially extends to the commodification of the human body itself as a form of primitive accumulation. Eagleton (2000:17) emphasizes that these perspectives show that capitalist exploitation is not just about paid work but is deeply embedded in the broader social structures that demean human dignity.

2.2.3 Economic Exploitation

Economic exploitation refers to the unfair treatment of workers within the labor process, typically manifested through underpaid labor and unfavorable working conditions (Eagleton, 2000:3). According to the foundational Marxist framework (Marx, 1867:799), this represents a systemic injustice where wealth and power are concentrated in an elite few, while the working class is entirely dependent on wages to meet basic needs. Within capitalism, Marx (1867:45) argues that exploitation is structural, occurring when the surplus value produced by workers is appropriated by capital owners. Consequently, workers are compelled to sell their labor for survival yet receive compensation far below the actual value they produce. Eagleton (2000:5) also emphasizes that the dynamics of this economic exploitation are fiercely maintained by social institutions and overarching ideologies that strictly regulate access to resources and opportunities, ensuring the continuous domination of the capitalist class over vulnerable workers.

2.2.4 Depiction of Economic Exploitation

Depiction serves as a means of revealing unequal power relations concealed within social and economic conditions. In the context of Marxism, it demonstrates that capitalism operates not only through wage relations but also through institutionalized structures. Marx (1976:283) systematically depicts economic exploitation through three specific mechanisms.

1. Absolute Surplus Value

According to Marx (1976:340), the main depiction of economic exploitation in capitalism is Absolute Surplus Value. This occurs when capitalists extend the hours

of labor past the exact duration required for the working class to generate the equivalent worth of their own subsistence (Marx, 1867:432). This system depends entirely on the contribution of unpaid labor. After workers have earned their wages, any additional time they spend working becomes profit that goes to the capitalist. Marx depicts this drive as a predatory impulse, and he uses the idea of vampires and werewolves to show how capital constantly seeks out living labor (Marx, 1976:342). This imagery emphasizes that exploitation is not simply a matter of unequal exchange, but a continuous process that unfolds within the labour process itself.

2. Relative Surplus Value

The second depiction of economic exploitation in capitalism appears in the production of relative surplus value, which is how capital increases surplus not the systemic extraction of relative surplus value, but by minimizing the hours necessary to reproduce the value of labor power. Marx (1867:432) explains that through increased productivity, such as mechanization and the division of labor, the cost of basic commodities falls, which in turn lowers the value of labor power. As a result, the unpaid portion increases without any extension of total working hours. Therefore, workers produce more surplus value within the same time frame and receive no additional compensation for the increased productivity. In this way, exploitation intensifies through the structural reorganization of production rather than through a simple increase in working hours.

3. Intensification of Labor

Marx also depicted economic exploitation through the concept of labor intensification. According to Marx (1867:534), when legal regulations limit the duration of daily labor and limit the generation of excess labor value through time expansion, capitalists respond by increasing the intensity of labor. Instead of extending the duration of work, capital demands a greater expenditure of effort within the same timeframe. This is achieved by accelerating the pace of production, reducing breaks, tightening supervision, and dividing tasks more finely. Marx refers to this process as “filling up the pores of the working day,” meaning that every minute is compressed so that a single hour of labor produces significantly more output than before. Through this mechanism, capital continues to extract surplus value without extending working hours. Thus, labor intensification stands between absolute and relative surplus value because it raises the workload without increasing working hours and does not rely solely on technological innovation.

2.2.5 Causes of Economic Exploitation

The causes of economic exploitation are rooted in the structural logic of capitalism itself. Marx (1867:80) explains that this system creates conditions in which capital owners' profit from labor is performed by workers, while workers receive only a fraction of the value they create. Exploitation does not stem from individual moral failings, but from the functioning of the system in which the property-owning minority commands all productive assets and the disenfranchised majority possesses their labour power solely. The working class earns a subsistence income that remains lower than the total output they generate, and the difference

becomes surplus value appropriated by capitalists as profit (Marx, 1867:204). Thus, these causes are elaborated through the following points:

1. The Separation of Laborers from the Means of Production

A fundamental cause of exploitation is the separation of laborers from the means of production, which Marx terms primitive accumulation (Marx, 1867/1990:874). This historical process involves the forcible removal of producers from their land and tools through violence and expropriation, leaving them with no alternative but to sell their labor power to survive. Marx describes these workers as legally "free" yet entirely deprived of productive property, rendering their freedom illusory. Without access to the means of production, the working class becomes structurally dependent on capitalists. This separation is the absolute prerequisite that enables capital to extract surplus value from labor.

2. The Commodification of Labor Power

Once separated from the means of production, labor power is transformed into a commodity traded on the market. Marx (1990:270) distinguishes that workers do not sell the product of their labour, but their capacity to work. The wages workers receive reflect only the minimum cost necessary to sustain their lives, while the excess value produced during surplus labor time is appropriated by the capitalist as surplus value. The wages they receive reflect only the minimum cost necessary for subsistence, while the value produced during surplus labor time is appropriated by the capitalist. This mechanism creates a structural illusion of equal exchange, concealing the reality that profit is derived from unpaid labor. Ultimately, the commodification of labor power reduces human beings to mere instruments of

capital accumulation, legitimized through employment contracts that appear "free" on the surface.

3. Private Ownership of the Means of Production

Private ownership of the means of production grants capitalists the power to control the production process and extract surplus value without contributing labor themselves. Marx (1867:927) emphasizes that capitalist ownership differs from the property of small producers because it is obtained through the exploitation of others' labor rather than through one's own work. This structure creates a power imbalance that forces workers to accept the conditions imposed by owners, such as long working hours and low wages. As a result, private ownership enables the extraction of labor value, ensuring that the product belongs to the capitalist while workers retain only the ability to sell their labor power.

4. The Capitalist Drive for Accumulation

Capital accumulation functions as an internal law of capitalism. Marx (1990:739) explains that capitalists are compelled to increase their capital to remain competitive. Surplus value must be reinvested to enhance productivity and reduce labor costs, not simply out of personal greed but as a structural necessity imposed by market competition. Therefore, exploitation arises as a logical outcome of the system, since continuous extraction of surplus value becomes essential for capitalist survival.

5. The Existence of a Reserve Army of Labor

The final structural cause of exploitation is the existence of a reserve army of labor. Marx (1990:782) identifies this as a population of unemployed or

underemployed workers created by the system itself. Their existence acts as a lever to suppress the wages of active workers and force them to work harder. Because a replacement is always available, employed workers are discouraged from demanding better treatment or higher pay. Therefore, structural unemployment becomes a tool of labor discipline that allows capitalists to sustain profits and maintain dominance over the working class.

2.2.6 Effects of Economic Exploitation

Economic exploitation has various impacts on individuals and society. Smith (2016:102) notes that it increases social vulnerability and traps individuals in cycles of poverty. Marx (1867:347) argues that exploitation reinforces structural inequality, allowing the capitalist class to accumulate wealth while the working class remains in precarity. Darrity Jr. (2008:625) adds that these conditions intensify instability and reduce the overall quality of life for workers. Exploitation therefore operates not only as an economic relation but as a structural force that shapes material conditions, psychological experiences, and ideological perceptions in capitalist society. These effects can be seen in at least four major dimensions:

1. Alienation

Beyond material poverty, economic exploitation generates alienation, as workers are increasingly separated from their labour, their humanity, and their relations with others. Marx (1867:569) identifies four dimensions of this phenomenon, in which workers are alienated from the product of their labor, which is appropriated by the capitalist, from the labor process, where they have no control over their work, from their human essence, as work becomes merely a means of

survival rather than creativity, and from fellow human beings due to competition for wages. Harvey (2005:12) adds that this condition results in feelings of powerlessness and a loss of meaning, demonstrating that exploitation undermines the very essence of humanity.

2. Accumulation of Misery

The accumulation of misery describes the long-term consequences of capital accumulation on workers' living conditions. Marx (1867:799) argues that the expansion of capital proceeds alongside the deterioration of workers' welfare. As machines and technology replace labour, many workers become excluded from production and form a reserve labour pool willing to accept lower wages. Workers who remain employed face higher work intensity, insecurity, and declining access to basic needs. Despite economic growth and rising productivity, improvements do not translate into proportional benefits for workers. Instead, inequality increases, so that wealth accumulates on one side while misery accumulates on the other.

3. Physical and Mental Degradation

Economic exploitation contributes directly to physical and mental degradation. Marx (1867:548) explains that the pursuit of surplus value compels capital to extend working hours and intensify tasks, leading to chronic exhaustion and permanent physical damage. At the same time, the extreme division of labor and dependence on machinery stunt the worker's intellectual capabilities, reducing them to mere appendages of the machine. Under these conditions, workers lose control over the labor process and are deprived of the opportunity to develop their creativity or maintain a healthy social life. Thus, exploitation not only drains labor power

economically but also undermines the worker's physical vitality and human potential.

4. Creation of Industrial Reserve Army

The creation of an industrial reserve army means that capitalism systematically maintains a group of unemployed or underemployed workers in order to sustain the functioning of the system. Marx (1867:782) explains that technological advancement and increased labour efficiency reduce the need for workers, producing structural unemployment and underemployment. This surplus labour force keeps wages low and discourages workers from demanding better conditions, as they know they can be easily replaced. Although the reserve army never disappears, unemployment remains a functional component of capitalism, sustaining exploitation and profitability.

2.2.7 Forms of Economic Exploitation

1. Formal Subsumption of Labour

Formal subsumption of labor is the initial form of exploitation in capitalism, when capital begins to control labor without changing the existing means of production. Formal subsumption refers to the earliest form of capitalist exploitation, in which labor becomes subordinated to capital without altering traditional methods of production. Marx (1867:510) explains that workers continue to use the same tools and techniques as before, yet the product of their labor becomes the property of the capitalist. Surplus value is mainly obtained through the extension of working hours rather than through increased productivity. Consequently, this form is usually

temporary and transitional, appearing in early manufacturing, because its limited productivity pushes capital to seek more advanced methods of extraction.

2. Real Subsumption of Labor

Real subsumption occurs when capital changes the labor process itself. Marx (1867:520) explains that in this form, productivity increases through the use of machines, technological innovation, and a strict division of labor. Exploitation no longer depends on extending working hours, but on reducing the time needed to produce the value of labor power. Workers then perform narrow, repetitive tasks and lose control over the production process. Real subsumption shows a higher level of capitalist domination, where control over labor is built directly into the technical and organizational structure of production.

3. Hybrid Subsumption

Hybrid subsumption emerges when capital intensifies labor as a response to legal restrictions that prevent the extension of the working day. According to Marx (1867:534), following the implementation of the Factory Acts, capitalists shifted their strategy from extending hours to increasing the intensity of labor. By accelerating production speeds and minimizing breaks, capital forces workers to expend greater physical and mental energy within a shorter timeframe. Tighter supervision and faster machinery ensure that every moment of work is strictly regulated. This form demonstrates that government regulations do not automatically reduce exploitation, as capital can shift from extending labor time to intensifying labor output, pushing workers beyond physical limits.

2.2.8 Class Consciousness and Resistance

From a Marxist perspective, the struggle against economic exploitation is inherently a collective phenomenon rather than a solitary response. It arises directly from the capitalist structure that subordinates the working class. This struggle unfolds in at least three major aspects.

1. Class Struggle as the Core of History

Marx and Engels (1867:344) argue that human history is defined by the history of class struggle. In capitalism, the main conflict occurs between the bourgeoisie, who own the means of production, and the proletariat, who possess only their labor power. These class interests directly oppose each other because the bourgeoisie seek to maximize profit through exploitation, while the proletariat is forced to resist conditions that degrade their economic, social, and human existence. As a result, the relationship between them becomes a perpetual state of conflict.

2. Collective Action and Class Consciousness

Resistance to exploitation initially appears in fragmented or even manifests as competition among workers. Over time, industrial development allows workers to recognize that they share the same position and interests. According to Marx (1867:763), this realization fosters class consciousness, leading to the formation of labor unions, strikes, and demands for better working conditions. These actions serve not only practical purposes but also strengthen the collective awareness that workers hold common interests that are fundamentally distinct from those of the capitalists.

3. The Ultimate Goal of the Revolution

For Marxists, the goal of this struggle does not stop at reforms within capitalism. Marx and Engels (1867:929) emphasize that the struggle must ultimately lead to revolution, specifically, the abolition of private ownership of the means of production and the establishment of a classless society. Only through this process can exploitation and alienation be eliminated, allowing workers to reclaim control over their labor and social life.

2.3. Methods of Study

2.3.1 Research Approach

This research utilizes a qualitative methodology. According to Creswell (2014:4), qualitative research is a fundamental procedure for analyzing and making sense of the perspectives held by distinct populations regarding human matters. In the context of literary study, this qualitative approach is combined with a Marxist approach to examine the phenomenon of economic exploitation. This framework posits that literary works reflect material social conditions, examining how class struggle and inequality shape human experience. According to Eagleton (2000:12), the Marxist approach to literature allows readers to analyse how literary works reflect the economic basis of society, specifically focusing on the role of class in shaping characters in the text. Consequently, this research utilizes Marx's theory of economic exploitation as its primary lens to investigate the structural domination and class inequality experienced by the main character, Kiara, in *Nightcrawling*.

2.3.2 Method of Data Collection

This study employs library research, defined by George (2008:6) as the identification of factual information and expert opinions relevant to the research problem. The data consists of primary and secondary sources. Primary data refers to original materials directly related to the study (Creswell, 2014:16), and in literary research, it is typically the text being analyzed (Dawson, 2002:48). In this study, the primary source is *Nightcrawling* by Leila Mottley. The primary data are taken directly from the novel in the form of textual quotations. These quotations include dialogues between characters (such as Kiara's transactions with the police and her conflicts with her family), internal monologues that reveal Kiara's psychological state and emerging class consciousness, as well as narrative descriptions that portray her harsh environment, poor living conditions, and the daily actions she takes to survive economic exploitation.

Meanwhile, secondary data consists of information previously collected and published by other researchers (Creswell, 2014:26). In this thesis, secondary data is derived from literary criticism, books, digital resources, and academic journals that support and contextualize the Marxist analysis of economic exploitation in literature.