

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

1.1. Background of the Study

Economic exploitation often occurs in societies across various countries, including the United States, which is often associated with the capitalist system. This phenomenon is commonly experienced by the working class and economically disadvantaged groups in everyday life. Harvey (2010:109) claimed that capitalism is a system in which wealth is controlled by individuals or groups who possess capital, while the majority of society, or the working class, depends on wages to meet their basic needs. The economic inequality caused by capitalism is evident in the weakening of the middle whose living conditions are far from adequate, and the increasing massive accumulation by a small elite group. A concrete example of economic disparity is found in Oxfam's report (2020:12), which reveals that the global top percentile controls twice as many financial assets as the remaining ninety-nine per cent of humanity. This indicates that economic exploitation is a continuously growing problem, affecting the lives of millions of people globally. Furthermore, Piketty (2014:45) emphasizes that capitalism functions beyond a mere financial framework, acting as a societal structure that tends to oppress less fortunate groups in society.

Issues of economic exploitation are frequently addressed in literary works, as literature can reflect existing social realities. One of the literary works that reflects this issue is the novel entitled *Nightcrawling* written by Leila Mottley.

Nightcrawling is the debut novel written by Mottley, which tells the story of Kiara, a 17-year-old girl struggling to overcome economic hardship and social pressures in Oakland, California. Amid economic difficulties, Kiara becomes entangled in a world of exploitation, forced into prostitution to support herself and her older brother after the death of their parents. In *Nightcrawling*, economic exploitation is portrayed not only through workplace injustices but also through social and structural pressures that limit an individual's life choices. Social injustices and economic disparities can drive individuals to take extreme actions for survival.

The writer chose this novel as the object of study, as it does not only depict Kiara's personal life, but also depicts the conditions experienced by many, particularly adolescents facing similar challenges in a capitalist society where economic inequality continues to rise. People worldwide, in both developed and developing countries, face great economic pressure and get trapped in poverty. The themes presented in this novel play a crucial role in raising social and economic issues that are often not openly discussed. Through Kiara's story, the author gives voice to those frequently overlooked by the prevailing economic and social systems. Moreover, the author presents a sharp perspective on how capitalism fails to protect individuals enduring severe material deprivation and how challenging it is for one to escape life's pressures, especially when they lack adequate economic access and are exploited by larger systems. The analysis of economic exploitation in this novel can provide deeper insights into how capitalism affects individuals in the context of contemporary literature, particularly from a Marxist theoretical perspective.

Therefore, this research thesis will analyze how economic exploitation of the main character, Kiara, is depicted in *Nightcrawling*, as well as the causes of this exploitation and how it affects her life and decisions. This research thesis also examines the forms of economic exploitation she faces and explores her financial struggles as part of a broader reflection on systemic inequality. This study is expected to contribute to the understanding of economic exploitation in contemporary literature and its relevance to the struggles of modern society in facing economic injustice.

1.2. Research Problem

1. How is the economic exploitation towards Kiara depicted in Leila Mottley's *Nightcrawling*?
2. What are the causes of economic exploitation and how does it affect Kiara's life and decisions in Leila Mottley's *Nightcrawling*?
3. What forms of economic exploitation does Kiara face in Leila Mottley's *Nightcrawling*?
4. How does Kiara develop class consciousness and resistance against economic exploitation in Leila Mottley's *Nightcrawling*?

1.3. Objectives of Study

1. To analyze how the economic exploitation of the main character, Kiara, is depicted in Leila Mottley's *Nightcrawling*.
2. To analyze the causes of economic exploitation and its effects on Kiara's life and decisions in Leila Mottley's *Nightcrawling*.

3. To analyze the different forms of economic exploitation that Kiara faces in Leila Mottley's *Nightcrawling*.
4. To analyze how Kiara develops class consciousness and resistance against economic exploitation in Leila Mottley's *Nightcrawling*.

1.4. Scope of Study

This study covers the intrinsic elements and the Marxist perspective of economic exploitation in Leila Mottley's *Nightcrawling*. The discussion of intrinsic elements includes the characters, characterizations, setting, and conflict. Meanwhile, the research is specifically rooted in Marxist literary theory to deeply analyze the phenomenon of economic exploitation in the novel. Through this theoretical lens, the study examines the depiction of economic exploitation, its structural causes, its effects on Kiara's life and decisions, and the different forms of exploitation she faces. It also examines her emerging class consciousness and symbolic resistance against the structural inequality within capitalist society.

1.5. Previous Study

This research thesis does not find any previous academic studies specifically analyzing Leila Mottley's *Nightcrawling*. However, the research thesis does identify several articles and reviews discussing various aspects of the novel published on platforms such as Goodreads, *The New York Times*, and *Kirkus Reviews*. These reviews and analyses mostly focus on the novel's literary qualities, urban struggles, racial inequality, and the challenges faced by the main character, Kiara. Professional reviews from *The New York Times* and *Kirkus Reviews* praise the beautiful writing style and realistic portrayal of this novel about a black teenager

surviving on the tough streets of Oakland. However, they also point out that the novel can be quite heavy going and that the character of Kiara sometimes feels a little too perfect. In addition, many readers on Goodreads highlight how moving her journey is, although some feel that certain events in the story feel unrealistic. While these reviews describe the emotional and literary aspects of the novel, none of them actually address the issue of economic exploitation. To fill this gap, this study will not only look at the story from a general literary perspective. Instead, this study applies a Marxist perspective to analyze the structural mechanisms of economic exploitation, class struggle, and the commodification of the main character's body.