
Poverty Representation and Social Issues in Jesmyn Ward's *Sing, Unburied, Sing*

Raihan Syach Bustami Harahap^{1a*}, Nurholis^{2b}, Agry Pramita^{3c}
Program Studi Sastra Inggris, Universitas Islam Negeri Sunan Gunung Djati, Bandung, Indonesia¹²³
raihansyach66@gmail.com^a, nurholis@uinsgd.ac.id^b, agrypramita@uinsgd.ac.id^c

Abstract: Sastra memberikan perspektif yang unik tentang isu-isu sosial pada masa di mana karya sastra tersebut ditulis. Penelitian ini akan mengeksplorasi representasi kemiskinan dan isu-isu sosial dalam sebuah novel dengan menggunakan kerangka teori yang disediakan oleh analisis sastra dan konteks sosial. Kemiskinan dan isu-isu sosial dalam novel *Sing, Unburied, Sing* karya Jesmyn Ward akan menjadi salah satu variabel yang memiliki peran besar. Novel ini mengeksplorasi aspek-aspek ras, keluarga, dan isu-isu sosial yang menekankan pada dampak kemiskinan terhadap karakter. Penelitian ini dilakukan dengan menggunakan pendekatan penelitian kualitatif deskriptif dengan desain analisis teks. Subjek penelitian ini adalah kemiskinan dan isu-isu sosial. Sementara itu, data atau objek penelitiannya adalah novel karya Jesmyn Ward yang berjudul *Sing, Unburied, Sing*. Teknik pengumpulan data yang digunakan adalah teknik observasi dan teknik catat. Berdasarkan hasil penelitian, penulis menyimpulkan bahwa setidaknya ada beberapa representasi kemiskinan dan isu sosial yang digambarkan melalui narasi dan dialog dalam novel ini. Beberapa isu tersebut direpresentasikan melalui penggambaran lingkungan rumah Jojo yang berada di daerah hutan terpencil dengan standar kebersihan yang minim.

Kata Kunci: Sosiologi sastra, masalah sosial, kemiskinan, representasi

Abstract: *Literature provides a unique perspective on the social issues of the time in which it was written. This research will explore the representation of poverty and social issues in a novel using the theoretical framework provided by literary analysis and social context. Poverty and social issues in the novel Sing, Unburied, Sing, by Jesmyn Ward will be one of the variables with a large role. The novel explores aspects of race, family, and social issues that emphasise the effects of poverty on the characters. This research was conducted using a descriptive qualitative research approach with a text analysis design. The subject of this research is poverty and social issues. Meanwhile, the data or object of research is Jesmyn Ward's nove entitled Sing, Unburied, Sing. The technique for collecting data is observation and noting technique. Based on the findings, the author concludes that there are at least several representations of poverty and social issues depicted through the narrative and dialogue in this novel. Some of these issues are represented by the depiction of Jojo's home environment, situated in a remote forest area, with a lack of basic hygiene standards.*

Keywords: *Sociology of literature, social issues, poverty, representation*

Article info: Submitted | Accepted | Published
10-05-2024 | 20-06-2024 | 30-06-2024

INTRODUCTION

As an expression of society (Wellek and Warren, 1956, cited in Syawal, Rahman, and Amir, 2022, p. 267), literature provides a unique perspective on the social issues of the time in which it

was written. Literature is a written form of expression that imparts moral lessons about truth via the use of eloquent language (Nurholis, 2019). An author's work can reflect the lives and issues around them, offering insights into the social context and human condition (Wee and Banister, 2016, cited in Syawal, Rahman, and Amir, 2022, p. 267). Furthermore, as stated by (Manshor et al., 2020), in the context of globalisation, where technological advancement and economic development coexist with moral depravity and social problems, literature serves as a mirror to the complexities of society. In their 1942 publication *Theory of Literature*, (Warren & Wellek, 1956) proposed three distinct types of literary sociology: the sociology of authors, the sociology of literature, and the sociology of readers and the social impact of literature. The sociological examination of literary works posits that literature mirrors and represents societal norms. The content of literary works is regarded as a reflection, or even recreation, of the realities observed within society. One of the principal areas of sociological study in the context of literary works is the content of literary works, as well as the purpose and other implications of literary works in relation to social issues (Lestariningsih and Liliani, 2018: 80-81). Taine (Laurenson and Swingewood, 1972, cited in Syawal, Rahman, and Amir, 2022, p. 268) proposes a formula of systematic of 'race, milieu (environmental conditions), and moment (socio-political conditions)' with which literary studies can be approached from a sociological perspective and in combination with the three factors.

Moreover, as elucidated by Machmoed, (2021), literary works, particularly novels, serve as a point of reference for the ascertainment of the social conditions prevailing at the time a novel was written. Consequently, only high-quality literary works are able to reflect the society social conditions accurately. Consequently, some authors consider unique literary works to be merely material to be sold; therefore, they are of lower value than literary works which the author considers to be a form of communication with readers (Syawal et al., 2022)

Social issues offer valuable insights into the experience of poverty and its relationship with identity and social exclusion. Poverty is not merely an economic condition; it is also an identity that influences our self-concept and our place within society. Social exclusion and stigmatization can lead to feelings of shame and anxiety, further compounding the challenges faced by those living in poverty. Poverty is an enduring social problem that has preoccupied societies throughout history. The concept of poverty encompasses numerous aspects and has been operationalized through various indicators and agendas (Gubrium & Lødemel, 2013). Poverty is not merely an economic condition; it is also an identity that shapes our understanding of ourselves and our place in society. Social exclusion and stigmatisation can lead to feelings of shame and anxiety, further compounding the challenges faced by those living in poverty. Poverty is a social problem that has been a constant concern for society throughout history. The concept of poverty has many aspects and has been operationalised through various indicators and agendas (Gubrium, 2014)

This research will explore the representation of poverty and social issues in a novel using the theoretical framework provided by literary analysis and social context. Poverty and social issues in the novel *Sing, Unburied, Sing*, by Jesmyn Ward will be one of the variables with a large role. The novel explores aspects of race, family, and social issues that emphasise the effects of poverty on the characters. The novel chronicles the experiences of Jojo, a 13-year-old boy who assumes parental duties for his younger sibling due to the incarceration of his father and the substance abuse of his mother.

In his 2020 publication, (Pujiati et al., 2020) posited that poverty is the primary concern in the Hansel and Gretel narrative, citing several reasons. One such reason is the abandonment of the children by their parents in the forest due to their inability to fulfill their basic needs. Similarly, poverty in this story is depicted through the lack of food intake and scarcity that occurs in both of their lands.

Furthermore, (Utami et al., 2022) concluded in their study, entitled "Social Issue in John Boyne's *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas*," that there were five social issues contained in the novel. One of the key themes is racism, slavery, child labour, class differences, and discrimination against women and children. Based on the above, the author is curious about how and whether there is a picture or representation of poverty and social issues in the novel *Sing, Unburied, Sing*, by Jesmyn Ward since there are no similar or same research has been done exploring the representation of poverty and social issue in this novel. The author's objective was to analyse and identify the aspects of poverty and social issues present in the novel *Sing, Unburied, Sing* by Jesmyn Ward, employing the framework of literary theory, including the sociology of literature. By examining the author's portrayal of poverty and its impact on characters and society, it is hoped that readers will gain a deeper understanding of the complexities of poverty and its relationship with identity and social exclusion.

METHOD

The methodological approach employed in the present study is structural analysis. This commences with a comprehensive review of the extant literature, which serves to provide a solid foundation of data of research. Subsequently, a meticulous review and analysis of the data are conducted in order to achieve the study's objectives. The research was conducted in accordance with a descriptive qualitative approach, with a text analysis design.

As defined by (Fraenkel et al., 2011), the descriptive method can be characterised as a technique used in the explanation, analysis, and classification of phenomena through the application of various methods, including surveys, interviews, questionnaires, observation, and tests. Moreover, (Fraenkel et al., 2011) describe qualitative research as "research studies that investigate the quality of relationships, activities, situations, or materials."

Qualitative research employs a number of techniques, including descriptive along with categorising techniques, in order to gain an understanding of the subject matter under investigation. These techniques include open-ended interviews, naturalistic observation, and document analysis.

In addition, due to the limitation of time and quantity of the novel, the writer used purposive sampling. Purposive sampling effectively identifies and selects cases using limited research resources (Palinkas et al., 2015). Regarding that, the writers decided to use purposive sampling. The writers only focus on the representation of poverty and social issues contained in chapter 1 and 2 of a novel that the writer has chosen. since there are limited things such as time and the analysis. Therefore, there are several steps to collecting the data and conducting the research that consisted of. First step, the writer will be reading the chapter one and chapter two of the novel comprehensively. Secondly, the writer will be taking note of the data in conformity with the problem previously outlined. The data will comprise events, quotations and narrations which relate to the phenomenon of poverty and social issue in the research object. Thirdly, the writer will analyse the data by combining and also dividing the data in order to reach a conclusion.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Based on the reading with purposive sampling method to collect the data, the researcher found that there are poverty and social issue represented in the novel by Jesmin Ward *Sing, Unburied, Sing*.

Later that night, he told me stories about him and his sisters and brothers when they were young, playing barefoot because all they had was one pair of shoes each and them for church. They all got worms, and when they used the outhouse, they pulled worms out of their butts. (Ward, 2017: 8)

The sentence fragment above portrays poverty through the children's barefoot status, as they only possess one pair of shoes. These shoes are exclusively utilised for church services. Furthermore, the children's poverty is evidenced by their experience of 'worms', which forces them to remove the worms from their rectum. This can result in a range of social issues, including health concerns within the local community. Additionally, the effects of poverty on the economy and race are also evident. The novel's backdrop of a black family struggling in poverty presents a compelling context for exploring the social issues that can arise in such circumstances. These include the potential for bullying, which will be discussed in depth in the novel. As (Aminah, 2018) in her paper, those who are poor lack access to basic needs such as food, education, housing, and employment. They are also often constrained in their ability to obtain the resources and means to improve their situation. This situation thus results in the enrichment of the affluent and the impoverishment of the indigent.

Her mouth opens and I wave at the circling fly, and Kayla lets off a little snore. (Ward, 2017: 11)

The above quote provides an illustrative example of the interrelationship between poverty and social environmental issues. The impact of the poverty that has been experienced by the family is evident in the hygiene standards, which are below normal levels. This is exemplified by the presence of flies around Jojo's sister's mouth. The dialog below also correlated with what (Parrillo, 2008) said about poverty. Parrillo (2008: 697-698) asserts that global poverty represents a significant social challenge. It is the manifestation of the untapped and unrealised potential of millions of individuals, and it has a profound impact on societal well-being, resulting in diminished income and productivity, increased illness, social dysfunction, and environmental degradation.

He turned and grabbed her by her arms, and they were yelling and breathing hard and pushing and pulling each other across the porch. They were so close to each other, their hips and chests and faces, that they were one, scuttling, clumsy like a hermit crab over sand. And then they were leaning in close to each other, speaking, but their words sounded like moans. (Ward, 2017: 13)

The excerpt from the story above indicates that Jojo's parents, Michael, and Leonie, engaged in intense physical and verbal conflict. Domestic violence is a social issue that has been observed in various historical periods. Poverty is a significant contributing factor to this phenomenon, as evidenced by Jesmyn Ward's portrayal in the novel. Therefore, it can be argued that this excerpt represents the social issues that arise from poverty. As (Satiman et al., 2023a) said, the emergence of social problems can be attributed to a multitude of factors, including economic, biological, psychological, and cultural influences. Economic factors, such as poverty, unemployment, prostitution, and crime, can give rise to social problems. Biological factors, such as physical illness and disability, can also contribute to the development of social problems. Psychological factors, such as mental illness, poor memory, adjustment difficulties, and suicide, can also influence the emergence of social problems (Satiman et al., 2023a).

“She ashed her cigarettes and put them out in an empty Coke she had been drinking, and when I bit into the sandwich, she said: “That looks disgusting.”” (Ward, 2017: 14)

The above quote illustrates the underlying causes of social issues, which can give rise to further social issues. Poor parenting can result in social issues such as child delinquency, a lack of positive motivation towards children, a reduction in socialisation skills, and an unfavourable image of children towards their parents or the surrounding environment. Social problems can be understood as undesirable, abnormal symptoms within a given society. The inability of social elements to function as expected by that society causes disappointment and suffering among members of that same society (Soekanto & Sulistyowati, 2017). Consequently, the author identifies this quote as an exemplar of social issues that are prevalent in communities worldwide.

“Even that sounds gross,” Leonie said. She dropped her cigarette into the can and pushed it across the table to me where I stood eating. “Throw that away.”” (Ward, 2017: 15)

The above quote also exemplifies poor parenting, which is a contributing factor to social issues. Leonie, Jojo's mother, exhibits a negative attitude, not only by smoking in front of her teenage son, but also by using inappropriate language when her son eats. Additionally, Leonie demonstrates a controlling attitude towards her son by instructing him to dispose of the cigarette butts or to throw away his food. The attitude portrayed by Leonie can be potentially emerge a social problem. As (Satiman et al., 2023a) stated, cultural factors, including divorce, juvenile delinquency, religious differences, ethnic diversity, and racial discrimination, can contribute to the emergence of social problems.

“And when he got older, he was off to the juke joint. Papa said he was too handsome, said he’d been born pretty as a woman, and that’s why he got into so much trouble. Because people like pretty things, and things came to him too easy.” (Ward, 2017: 18)

The above quote can be interpreted in a number of ways. The author considers Pop's brother to have been born with a handsome face, even if he were born as a woman. Consequently, Pop's brother Stag gets into a lot of trouble. Stag felt that this was too much for him and even considered it not an advantage. The story continues with the narration that Stag

felt 'dead' inside, thus he started drinking alcohol. The author believes that Stag's experiences can be attributed to a social issue resulting from his social environment and mental health. Similar to what the writer stated about the factors of social problems or social issues. Psychological factors, such as mental illness, poor memory, adjustment difficulties, and suicide, can also influence the emergence of social problems (Satiman et al., 2023, p. 60)

"...one in a group of White men from up north stationed out on Ship Island. Wanted to have a good time with the coloreds, I guess, but bumped into Stag at the bar, and they had words, and then the man broke a bottle over Stag's head, and then Stag cut him, not enough to kill him, but enough to hurt him, to make him slow so Stag could run, but his friends beat up Stag before he could get a clean break." (Ward, 2017: 18-19))

The author posits that the above quote represents a form of social issue that occurs due to differences in class, colour, or race. The above can also be categorised as a social issue that occurs due to differences in social class between black people who are considered inferior and white people who are considered superior. It can be seen from the quote that Stag, Pop's brother, fought until a group of white men beat him up. (Utami et al., 2022) also concluded in their study, entitled "Social Issue in John Boyne's The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas," that one of the five social issues is class differences.

Richie, he was called. Real name was Richard, and he wasn't nothing but twelve years old. He was in for three years for stealing food: salted meat. Lot of folks was in there for stealing food because everybody was poor and starving... (Ward, 2017: 20)

"I was good at it. I been stealing since I was eight. I got nine little brothers and sisters always crying for food. And crying sick. Say they backs hurt; say they mouths sore. Got red rashes all over they hand and they feet. So thick on they face you can't hardly see they skin." (Ward, 2017: 22)

The above quotes indicates that Richie or Richard is a twelve-year-old boy. He has been imprisoned for three years for stealing salted meat. The quote, narrated from Pop's perspective, suggests that many people steal food due to poverty and hunger. The author posits that the above quote effectively portrays the poverty depicted in the novel. Social scientists typically describe poverty in two ways (Satiman et al., 2023b). Total destitution is described as a circumstance in which a person lacks the ability to meet their fundamental necessities, such as food, clothing, and shelter. This condition can lead one individual to create new social problems such as stealing, and pickpocketing.

"After my second day at the Cold Drink, I knew why Misty worked so hard: she was high every night. Lortab, Oxycontin, coke, Ecstasy, meth." (Ward, 2017: 28)

The above quote is from chapter two of the book. This time it is told through the point of view of Jojo's mother, Leonie, who works in a drinking establishment. The quote above illustrates

a social issue, namely the drug abuse by Misty, Leonie's co-worker, every night. The author argues that the above is one of the social issues contained in this story.

"I bent to the table. Sniffed. A clean burning shot through my bones, and then I forgot. The shoes I didn't buy, the melted cake, the phone call." (Ward, 2017: 28)

Based on the quote above, the author argues that Leonie commits and represents one of the social issues that often occur in society. Leonie abused addictive substances in order to forget the problems she was facing at the time, namely the shoes she didn't buy, the cake that melted, and also the mobile phone call from her husband, Michael, who was about to be released from prison.

CONCLUSION

This research aims to demonstrate the prevalence of poverty and social representations in Jesmyn Ward's novel *Sing, Unburied, Sing*. The novel explores the challenges faced by Jojo and his family, who are affected by the imprisonment of Jojo's father and the substance abuse of Jojo's mother. Additionally, the novel addresses the theme of racism, illustrating Jojo's struggles to fulfill his basic needs due to his mother's preference for drugs over food. The novel depicts various social issues.

Based on the results of the analysis, the author concludes that there are at least several representations of poverty and social issues depicted through the narrative and dialogue in this novel. The author finds that there are at least more than three representations of poverty and social issues found in this novel by Jesmyn Ward. Some of these issues are represented by the depiction of Jojo's home environment, situated in a remote forest area, with a lack of basic hygiene standards. Additionally, the character of Richard is shown stealing food, indicating a lack of resources to provide for his nine younger siblings, who are malnourished and suffering from illness. The social issues depicted in the novel include drug abuse by Leonie and Misty, food theft by Richard, the family home situation of Jojo, mental health and depression of Stag, racism by Stag and Pop, and bad parenting by Leonie. Furthermore, in accordance with Wellek and Warren's sociological approach, the author can also conclude that this novel reflects social reality that occurred in the 1940s in Mississippi, Parchman Farm, and the present. Due to the conclusion and this research's findings, the writer suggests that the next researchers to analyse the social issues especially poverty portrayed in this whole novel, since the writer confident that there are so much to explore in this novel through the lens of sociology of literature.

REFERENCES

Aminah, S. (2018). Social Injustice as Reflected in Charles Dickens' *Oliver Twist*. *ELS Journal on Interdisciplinary Studies in Humanities*, 1(4), 409–422. <https://doi.org/10.34050/els-jish.v1i4.4869>

- Fraenkel, J., Wallen, N., & Hyun, H. (2011). *How to Design and Evaluate Research in Education* (8a ed). McGraw-Hill Education.
<https://www.researchgate.net/publication/265086460> *How to Design and Evaluate Research in Education*
- Gubrium, E. K. (2014). Poverty, shame, and the class journey in public imagination. *Distinktion: Journal of Social Theory*, 15(1), 105–122. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1600910X.2013.809370>
- Gubrium, E. K., & Lødemel, I. (2013). ‘Not good enough’: social assistance and shaming in Norway. In *The shame of it* (pp. 85–110). Policy Press.
<https://doi.org/10.1332/policypress/9781447308713.003.0005>
- Lestariningsih, E., & Liliani, E. (2019). *Portrait of Poverty in the Pamangkulagit Yang Terhormat Short Story by Aba Mardjani*.
- Machmoed, H. A. (2021). The Pervasive Use of Politeness Strategy by Native Durinese of Massalle Variant Based on Sociolinguistics Analysis. In *International Journal of Innovative Science and Research Technology* (Vol. 6, Issue 6). www.ijisrt.com
- Manshor, Z., Abdullah, S., & Hamed, A. B. (2020). Poverty and the Social Problems. *International Journal of Academic Research in Business and Social Sciences*, 10(3).
<https://doi.org/10.6007/IJARBS/v10-i3/7076>
- Nurholis. (2019). *Pengantar Sosiologi Sastra: Teori dan Kritik Terhadap Karya Sastra Dilengkapi contoh Analisis*. Pustaka Setia.
- Palinkas, L. A., Horwitz, S. M., Green, C. A., Wisdom, J. P., Duan, N., & Hoagwood, K. (2015). Purposeful Sampling for Qualitative Data Collection and Analysis in Mixed Method Implementation Research. *Administration and Policy in Mental Health and Mental Health Services Research*, 42(5), 533–544. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10488-013-0528-y>
- Parrillo, V. (2008). *Encyclopedia of Social Problems*. SAGE Publications, Inc.
<https://doi.org/10.4135/9781412963930>
- Pujiati, H., Sahwari, S., & Wardani, L. D. (2020). Poverty and its Aesthetic Construction in Hansel and Gretel and The Tom Thumb. *MADAH*, 11(1), 69–80.
<https://doi.org/10.31503/madah.v11i1.232>
- Satiman, S., Chairani, S., Manugeran, M., & Purwarno, P. (2023a). Poverty In Andrea Hirata’s Novel *Orang Orang Biasa*. *Journal of Language*, 5(1), 55–68.
<https://doi.org/10.30743/jol.v5i1.6621>
- Soekanto, S., & Sulistyowati, B. (2017). *Sosiologi suatu pengantar* (48th ed.). Rajawali Pers.



Syawal, L. O. M. I., Rahman, F., & P., M. A. (2022). Social Condition of French Society pre-revolution in A Tale of Two Cities Novel by Charles Dickens. *TEKSTUAL*, 20(1), 37.
<https://doi.org/10.33387/tekstual.v20i1.4507>

Utami, I. A. M. I., Anggraeni, K. A. D., Suwastini, N. K. A., & Budiarta, I. W. (2022). SOCIAL ISSUES IN JOHN BOYNE'S THE BOY IN THE STRIPPED PYJAMAS. *Lingua Scientia*, 29(1), 11–22.
<https://doi.org/10.23887/lis.v29i1.34937>

Ward, J. (2017). *Sing, Unburied, Sing*. Scribner.
<https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/32920226-sing-unburied-sing>

Warren, A., & Wellek, R. (1956). *Theory of Literature* (3rd ed.). Harcourt, Brace & World.
https://books.google.co.id/books/about/Theory_of_Literature.html?id=gfBYAAAAMAAJ&redir_esc=y