Class, Inequality, and Ideology: A Marxist Comparative Study of *The Sweepress* and *Ghost Kitchen*

Tooba Bibi
BS Student, Department of English (Linguistics and Literature)
Government Degree College Batkhela, Malakand - Pakistan
iamtoobakhan@gmail.com

Wareesha Israr
BS Student, Department of English (Linguistics and Literature)
Government Degree College Batkhela, Malakand - Pakistan
iamwareeshaisrar@gmail.com

Suliman Khan (Corresponding author)
Lecturer, Department of English (Linguistics and Literature)
Government Degree College Batkhela, Malakand - Pakistan
suleman.uom5@gmail.com

Abstract:
This study examines how class inequality, economic exploitation, and ideological control shape the lives of marginalized workers in Tariq Rahman's *The Sweepress* and Ross Raisin's *Ghost Kitchen*. Using a qualitative approach rooted in Marxist literary criticism and supported by Althusser's theory of ideology, the research investigates how the poor are made invisible, undervalued, and socially restricted in both Pakistani and British societies. The analysis shows that although the two stories belong to different cultural backgrounds, both reveal how economic systems shape human experience and limit social mobility. The study addresses a gap in comparative literature by analyzing a South Asian servant-class narrative alongside a modern Western gig-economy narrative, demonstrating that exploitation is universal across cultures. The findings highlight that literature works as a mirror of society, revealing how labour, class, and ideology shape the daily lives of ordinary people, while also encouraging readers to question the structures that normalize injustice.

Keywords: Class, Inequality, Ideological control, Marxist literary criticism

Introduction

Literature has always been one of the most powerful ways of representing human experience, especially the experiences of those whose voices remain unheard in daily life. Writers all over the world use stories, poems, and novels not only to entertain readers but also to reveal the social and economic forces that shape people's lives. Literature therefore becomes a space where inequality, poverty, labour, and power relations can be studied with depth and emotional clarity. Through characters and events, fiction helps readers understand how different groups in society live, how they struggle for survival, and how they are shaped by forces much larger than their personal choices.

One of the strongest traditions in literary theory that focuses on such issues is Marxist criticism. Developed from the writings of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels in the nineteenth century, Marxism argues that material conditions, economic structures, and class relations determine how societies function. According to Marx, every society is divided into classes: those who own the means of production and those who sell their labour for survival. The working class produces wealth, but the benefits of that wealth go mostly to the ruling class, creating an unequal system that keeps the poor dependent,

obedient, and powerless. Critical theorists such as Eagleton (1976), Tyson (2006), and Barry (2002) explain that literature often exposes this inequality by portraying the lives of workers, the exploitation of labour, and the ideologies that justify oppression.

This theoretical background is especially useful for analysing Tariq Rahman's *The Sweepress* and Ross Raisin's *Ghost Kitchen*, two short stories that come from different cultural and historical contexts but deal with similar issues of class despair. Rahman's story focuses on Sukkhan, a sweepress belonging to a marginalized community in Pakistan. Her life is shaped by caste, poverty, gender, and social exclusion. Despite being essential to maintaining the cleanliness of wealthier households, she receives almost no recognition or respect. She moves through spaces where her presence is tolerated only as long as she remains invisible and obedient. Her physical work, emotional exhaustion, and constant humiliation show how deeply caste-based and class-based oppression are woven into everyday life in South Asia.

Raisin's story, on the other hand, is set in modern Britain and revolves around Sean, a gig-economy courier who works long hours delivering food prepared in ghost kitchens. The story captures the bleakness of contemporary urban labour, where technology promises freedom but actually increases worker vulnerability. Sean cycles in traffic, deals with harsh weather, faces digital surveillance, and receives unstable income. His work is physically draining and emotionally numbing, revealing how capitalism in its modern form continues to exploit labour even in advanced societies that claim to offer equal opportunities. Although Sean does not belong to a caste system, he is trapped in an economic structure that limits his mobility and makes him easily replaceable.

A central idea that links both stories is ideology, especially as explained by Louis Althusser. According to Althusser (1971), ideology operates through social institutions—such as family, religion, media, and workplace structures—that shape people's beliefs and behaviours without the use of force. These Ideological State Apparatuses (ISAs) convince individuals that their social position is natural and unavoidable. In *The Sweepress*, caste-based customs, derogatory language, and household hierarchies function as ideological tools that keep sweepers in a subordinate position. Sukkhan and her family internalize this ideology to the extent that they see humiliation as normal. In *Ghost Kitchen*, the gig-economy system—based on apps, ratings, and flexible hours—creates an illusion of independence while actually trapping workers in instability and low wages. Workers like Sean come to believe that this insecurity is normal in modern life.

Analysing these two stories together using Marxist and Althusserian theory offers a deeper understanding of how economic and ideological systems function across cultures. On the surface, Pakistan's caste system and Britain's digital capitalism appear unrelated. One is rooted in centuries-old social hierarchy, while the other is shaped by modern technology and global markets. Yet both systems serve the same purpose: maintaining the power of the elite while suppressing opportunities for the poor. Both Sukkhan and Sean work hard, yet they remain trapped in cycles of poverty, limited mobility, and social invisibility. Their experiences show that exploitation adapts to cultural contexts, but its basic structure remains constant.

This comparative perspective is necessary because existing research often examines South Asian caste-based labour and Western gig-economy labour separately. Many scholars have explored the sociology of Pakistani sanitation workers, the politics of caste, and the psychology of humiliation in postcolonial societies. Similarly, a growing body of Western scholarship investigates how the gig economy creates new forms of exploitation through unstable contracts and digital surveillance. However, very few studies bring these two worlds together to show the global nature of class oppression. This absence creates a gap in comparative literature, which this study aims to fill.

By comparing *The Sweepress* and *Ghost Kitchen*, the research reveals that exploitation is not limited to a specific country, religion, or economic system. Instead, it is a universal phenomenon that takes different shapes depending on the society in which it appears. The stories demonstrate that whether oppression is justified through caste ideology or digital ideology, the working class faces similar struggles: they are undervalued, overworked, and kept at the bottom of social hierarchies. Literature makes these injustices visible by presenting them through individual characters whose suffering becomes a symbol of collective experience.

The introduction therefore establishes the purpose of this study: to use Marxist literary criticism and Althusser's ideology theory to analyse how two culturally different stories portray the universal nature of class struggle. It also clarifies how the study addresses an important gap in comparative literature by linking South Asian caste-based labour with Western gig-economy labour. The goal is not only to understand the characters' lives but also to highlight the economic and ideological structures that shape those lives. By doing so, the research contributes to a wider discussion on global inequality and the role of literature in exposing injustice.

Literature Review

Marxist literary criticism provides a framework for understanding how literature reflects the social, economic, and political conditions of society. Marx and Engels (1848) argue that the development of human societies is driven by material conditions and class struggle, where the ruling class controls the means of production and the working class sells its labour. This framework is useful for analysing literary texts, because it allows scholars to see how economic and social forces influence characters, plot, and narrative structure. Literature becomes not just a work of imagination but also a social document revealing real-world hierarchies and power dynamics.

Eagleton (1976) emphasizes that literature is not a neutral reflection of society; it actively engages with ideology, revealing the ways in which social power structures shape consciousness. Williams (1977) similarly notes that literary works are part of the lived culture of society and cannot be separated from social and historical conditions. Applying these perspectives to Tariq Rahman's *The Sweepress* and Ross Raisin's *Ghost Kitchen* helps explain how literature can expose systemic exploitation, marginalization, and class-based oppression. The narratives show that the poor are not only economically deprived but also psychologically conditioned to accept their subordination.

Althusser's (1971) theory of Ideological State Apparatuses further explains how societies maintain social control without the overt use of force. According to Althusser, institutions such as family, religion, education, media, and workplace norms shape individuals' understanding of the world and

convince them that their social position is natural. In *The Sweepress*, caste-based rituals, language, and everyday social practices act as ideological tools that maintain the sweepress community's low status. Similarly, in *Ghost Kitchen*, the digital platforms, rating systems, and app-based communication create an ideological framework that normalizes precarious labour. Workers like Sean believe that unstable wages, exhausting schedules, and constant monitoring are simply part of life, demonstrating how ideology reinforces exploitation.

Research in South Asian literature has frequently focused on caste and class oppression. Khan et al., (2024) analysed Rahman's *Charity* and concluded that economic power determines social structures, highlighting the conflict between wealthy and poor families. Khan's study shows the exhaustion and frustration of the masses, while simultaneously exposing elite detachment. This work is particularly relevant for understanding *The Sweepress*, where the sweepress family is trapped in a social hierarchy that limits education, mobility, and respect. Their analysis also demonstrate how Marxist concepts of class and alienation can be applied to Pakistani literature to uncover systemic inequalities.

Tariq (2018) provided a Marxist critique of Daniyal Mueenuddin's short stories, showing how feudal systems in Pakistan perpetuate economic and social inequality. Tariq explains that the ruling class maintains power through control over land, wealth, and labour, while the poor remain dependent and subordinate. Similar patterns appear in Rahman's *The Sweepress*, where the sweepress family works tirelessly yet remains marginalized. Tariq's research is crucial because it shows that oppression is sustained not only through economic deprivation but also through social norms, reinforcing Althusser's view of ideology as an invisible but powerful tool.

Similarly, Sial (2025) analysed Ghayoor Bukhari's Saraiki poetry, revealing how literature can give voice to marginalized communities. The study demonstrates that artistic expression can expose poverty, social injustice, and exploitation, empowering the oppressed by reflecting their realities. This approach aligns with Rahman's narrative technique in *The Sweepress*, where detailed descriptions of physical labour, daily hardship, and humiliation create empathy for the working class. Sial's work shows that literature can function as both documentation and critique of social systems, providing evidence for the relevance of Marxist criticism in contemporary studies.

In Western literature, the struggles of the working class have been similarly highlighted. Dickens' (1854) *Hard Times* presents a society where workers are reduced to mechanical instruments, valued only for their labour. Stephen Blackpool, a working-class character, embodies the struggles of ordinary people who are exploited, alienated, and denied dignity. Similarly, Orwell's (1945) *Animal Farm* allegorizes the betrayal of revolutionary ideals and shows how the working class is manipulated by those in power. Boxer's loyalty and hard work, contrasted with the pigs' control, reflect the dynamics of exploitation, ideology, and class power that persist even under new systems of governance. Furthermore, Steinbeck's (1939) *The Grapes of Wrath* portrays migrant workers during the Great Depression, highlighting hunger, displacement, and social injustice. These studies underscore how Western writers have used literature to document and critique systemic exploitation, providing a comparative perspective for Raisin's *Ghost Kitchen*.

Raisin's story contributes to a growing body of research on the gig economy, precarious labour, and digital capitalism. Contemporary studies (Wood et al., 2019; De Stefano, 2016) indicate that gig workers face instability, low wages, and social isolation, despite being essential to urban economies. *Ghost Kitchen* dramatizes these realities through Sean's experiences, emphasizing that the psychological and physical stress of gig work mirrors historical labour exploitation. Althusser's theory is particularly useful here: digital platforms function as modern ISAs, shaping workers' perceptions of responsibility, independence, and normalcy. Sean and his colleagues internalize the ideology that their precarious conditions are natural, demonstrating how structural power operates subtly but effectively.

While previous research has been rich in analysing either South Asian caste-based exploitation or Western capitalist labour, there is a significant gap in comparative studies. Few scholars have explored cross-cultural parallels between traditional caste hierarchies and modern gig economies. Existing literature often treats these contexts in isolation, ignoring the shared mechanisms of exploitation, alienation, and ideological control. This gap limits our understanding of how structural inequality operates globally, as scholars rarely connect historical and contemporary forms of labour oppression.

This study addresses this gap by juxtaposing *The Sweepress* and *Ghost Kitchen* to show that exploitation is universal, though culturally and historically specific in form. By applying Marxist and Althusserian frameworks, it demonstrates that caste and capitalism, tradition and technology, both serve to maintain the power of the elite while restricting mobility for the working class. This comparative approach highlights that labour exploitation is not merely a local or historical phenomenon but a persistent global issue. Literature, therefore, becomes an essential tool for uncovering hidden ideologies, revealing how economic systems and social norms shape human experience, and encouraging critical reflection on injustice.

In summary, the literature review shows that both South Asian and Western literary traditions have engaged with issues of class, labour, and inequality. Previous studies provide a foundation for understanding exploitation and alienation in different contexts but rarely link these worlds. By filling this gap, the study situates *The Sweepress* and *Ghost Kitchen* within a broader global conversation about class struggle, demonstrating that literature can reveal the mechanisms of oppression and inspire critical awareness. The comparative lens enriches our understanding of Marxist theory and Althusser's ideology, illustrating how literature reflects the interplay of economic power, social norms, and individual lives across cultures and eras.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research design to investigate class inequality, economic exploitation, and ideological control in Tariq Rahman's *The Sweepress* and Ross Raisin's *Ghost Kitchen*. The qualitative approach is appropriate as the study aims to interpret textual narratives, explore the lived experiences of characters, and understand the socio-cultural and economic structures represented in the stories. Qualitative research prioritizes depth over breadth, focusing on meanings, interpretations, and contextual analysis rather than numerical measurement, which aligns with the objectives of this literary study (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

The study primarily uses close reading as the technique for textual analysis. Close reading involves careful, detailed, and repeated examination of text, focusing on language, imagery, narrative structure, character development, and thematic content. By using close reading, the research identifies patterns of oppression, ideological reinforcement, and social marginalization within the narratives. The method allows for both semantic and structural analysis, uncovering implicit and explicit representations of labour, class, and power dynamics. The study particularly follows the method outlined by Tyson (2006), which emphasizes the integration of textual evidence with theoretical interpretation, ensuring that textual observations are linked directly to Marxist concepts.

The conceptual framework of this study is guided by Marxist literary criticism and Althusser's theory of ideology. Marxist literary theory, as introduced by Marx and Engels (1848), provide the basis for examining class relations, economic exploitation, and alienation. Key concepts such as labour alienation, class struggle, and false consciousness are applied to the characters and situations in both stories. Althusser (1971) extends this understanding by highlighting how ideological apparatuses—including education, religion, media, and social norms—shape the consciousness of the working class and legitimize structural inequalities.

The theoretical framework has been summarized in Figure 1:

Figure1.

Conceptual Framework for Analysis of Class and Ideology in Literature

Theoretical Lens	Key Concepts	Application to Texts
Marxist Literary Theory	Alienation, Class Struggle, Exploitation, False Consciousness	Analysis of Sukkhan and Sean's labour, economic deprivation, and social subordination.
Althusserian Ideology	Ideological State Apparatuses (ISAs), Social Conditioning, Normalization of Inequality	Examination of caste-based norms in *The Sweepress* and gig-economy structures in *Ghost Kitchen*.

The study employs a comparative framework, examining both stories side by side to understand similarities and differences in the representation of labour and inequality across cultures. In the case of *The Sweepress*, analysis focuses on caste hierarchy, daily labour, social humiliation, and family dynamics. For *Ghost Kitchen*, attention is given to precarious employment, physical and emotional strain, digital control mechanisms, and workplace surveillance.

Secondary data sources include scholarly articles, books, essays on Marxism, studies of South Asian and Western labour, and prior analyses of the authors' works. These sources are used to support theoretical claims, provide historical and cultural context, and enhance the interpretive depth of the textual analysis.

The methodology clarifies that while the study is primarily qualitative; it integrates comparative analysis as a secondary approach to identify cross-cultural parallels. This approach is a form of qualitative comparative research

rather than statistical analysis, emphasizing interpretive depth and contextual understanding.

By using close reading within a Marxist and Althusserian framework, the study rigorously connects textual evidence to theoretical concepts. This method ensures that interpretations of Sukkhan's and Sean's experiences are grounded both in the narrative and in established critical theory, providing a structured yet flexible approach to understanding literature as a reflection of socio-economic and ideological realities.

Analysis & Discussion

This section provides a detailed, cross-cultural analysis of Tariq Rahman's *The Sweepress* and Ross Raisin's *Ghost Kitchen*, applying Marxist literary criticism and Althusser's ideology theory. The analysis focuses on economic exploitation, social invisibility, ideological control, and the psychological consequences of class-based oppression, integrating multiple textual excerpts with page numbers and theoretical interpretation.

In *The Sweepress*, Rahman presents the sweepress family's labour as physically demanding, socially demeaning, and psychologically exhausting. From the opening pages, Sukkhan's body bears the burden of inequality: "It was June and heat singed her callused feet on the burning road. She merely moved to the mud on the side street and stood torpid, not noticing the excrement on her basket and the flies hovering over it" (Rahman, 1998, p. 356). This illustrates Marx's concept of alienation, where the labourer is estranged from the product of her labour, her body, and even her social recognition. Despite performing essential tasks for the household and the community, Sukkhan's work is undervalued, showing how class hierarchies translate directly into physical and social suffering.

The ideological control embedded in social structures is pervasive. When a servant shouts, "Pare hut, pare hut, choore!" Sukkhan and her family must step aside (Rahman, 1998, p. 353). Althusser (1971) identifies this as an Ideological State Apparatus (ISA) in operation: everyday norms, language, and practices reinforce subordination and shape the consciousness of the oppressed. Even religious conversion does not alter Sukkhan's circumstances, underscoring that ideology and economic reality, rather than belief systems, sustain social hierarchies. Social rituals, linguistic insults, and enforced separation ensure that caste and class oppression are normalized and internalized.

Sukkhan's interactions with her son Muddu further demonstrate false consciousness. When she says, "Begum Sahiba gives me food," and Muddu responds, "Just some leftovers which she would throw away otherwise" (Rahman, 1998, p. 355), it is evident that the poor perceive minimal aid as generosity, masking systemic exploitation. This aligns with Marxist theory, showing how internalized norms prevent the working class from fully understanding their oppression and recognizing opportunities for resistance.

The staged accident behind Dr. Wudud's car is a striking example of structural inequality shaping moral and practical choices. Sukkhan risks physical harm to secure funds for her son's education (Rahman, 1998, p. 357). From a Marxist perspective, this behaviour is rational; extreme poverty necessitates strategies that may appear morally ambiguous but are essential for survival. It also exemplifies how systemic exploitation limits agency, compelling workers to negotiate oppressive structures creatively yet perilously.

In *Ghost Kitchen*, Sean experiences a contemporary form of similar oppression. He cycles through windowless kitchens, delivering food while navigating unpredictable schedules, harsh weather, and employer control (Raisin, 2020, p. 23). These conditions exemplify alienation in a modern capitalist context: workers are disconnected from the products of their labour and subjected to the controlling structures of platforms and supervisors. Physical exhaustion and psychological strain parallel Sukkhan's experience, highlighting continuity in labour exploitation across time and space.

Ideological control manifests in digital and managerial practices. Mehmet forces Ebdo to retrieve his pay envelope from hot oil, creating physical danger as a mechanism of control: "Ebdo stared into the fryer, at his money seething in the oil" (Raisin, 2020, p. 45). Here, Althusser's theory explains how modern ISAs operate through subtle coercion, shaping beliefs about work, obedience, and normality. Workers internalize precariousness and exploitative conditions as inherent to their role, reproducing structures of inequality without overt force. Gig economy platforms further normalize insecurity, as rating systems, algorithms, and app notifications condition workers to accept instability as natural.

Friendship and solidarity offer temporary relief but cannot dismantle systemic exploitation. Sean and Ebdo's bond provides emotional support, similar to Sukkhan's hope for Muddu's education. These relationships illustrate the emergence of class consciousness, a necessary step in recognizing structural oppression. However, the texts demonstrate that individual or interpersonal strategies alone cannot overcome entrenched systemic inequities.

Comparatively, both texts show convergent experiences despite differing cultural contexts. In Pakistan, caste and social norms enforce invisibility and marginalization; in Britain, technological control, economic precarity, and managerial authority restrict autonomy. Sukkhan and Sean endure dehumanization, invisibility, and limited mobility, emphasizing the universality of exploitation. Their psychological responses—internalized acceptance, endurance, and emerging class consciousness—reveal how oppression shapes thought and behaviour across cultures.

Narrative techniques reinforce these themes. Rahman's detailed depiction of labour, bodily strain, and social humiliation enhances the reader's understanding of structural inequality. Raisin employs narrative immediacy and bodily focus, showing the physical and emotional toll of gig work. Both authors make invisible labour visible, enabling readers to grasp the human cost of economic and ideological exploitation. These strategies echo Eagleton (1976), who argues that literature reveals underlying power structures and shapes consciousness.

Applying Marxist theory alongside Althusser's concept of ideology allows for a comprehensive interpretation. Marxism identifies material deprivation, alienation, and exploitation, while Althusserian ideology explains why these conditions persist through internalized social norms. The combination clarifies the mechanisms of oppression in both traditional caste-based societies and modern capitalist systems. Workers are not only economically deprived but ideologically conditioned to accept their status, demonstrating the interplay between material and ideological forces.

This analysis also addresses a gap in existing research. Previous studies have treated South Asian caste exploitation and Western gig-economy labour

separately, neglecting comparative perspectives. By examining *The Sweepress* and *Ghost Kitchen* side by side, this study illustrates how systemic labour oppression transcends cultural and temporal boundaries. Despite historical, technological, and social differences, the mechanisms of dehumanization, invisibility, and ideological control are strikingly similar, highlighting the universality of class-based oppression.

Furthermore, the texts reveal the long-term consequences of inequality on identity, agency, and social mobility. Sukkhan's constrained choices and Sean's eventual refusal to return to the ghost kitchen reflect different stages of class consciousness and resistance. Both narratives suggest that recognition of oppression is the first step toward challenging systemic inequality, but structural change requires collective awareness and societal transformation.

Overall, the cross-cultural analysis demonstrates that literature can serve as a critical tool for examining social and economic oppression. By integrating Marxist and Althusserian frameworks, this study elucidates how economic systems, social norms, and ideological mechanisms combine to perpetuate inequality. The analysis of these narratives confirms that labour exploitation is neither isolated nor culturally bound; it is a persistent global phenomenon, and literature provides a powerful lens to understand, critique, and question these enduring structures.

Conclusion

This study has examined Tariq Rahman's *The Sweepress* and Ross Raisin's *Ghost Kitchen* through the lens of Marxist literary criticism and Althusserian ideology to uncover the persistent mechanisms of economic exploitation and ideological control across different cultural contexts. By applying a qualitative, comparative approach with close reading, the research demonstrates how both texts depict workers who are dehumanized, marginalized, and constrained by systemic inequalities. The analysis has shown that despite the differences in historical, technological, and social settings, the experiences of Sukkhan and Sean reveal common patterns of oppression that reflect broader social and economic structures.

In *The Sweepress*, Rahman highlights the intersections of caste, gender, and class, showing how Sukkhan's labour, though essential, is undervalued and socially disregarded. Her physical suffering, daily humiliation, and internalized acceptance of minimal aid illustrate Marx's concepts of alienation and false consciousness, while Althusserian ideology explains how social norms and customs perpetuate inequality. Similarly, in *Ghost Kitchen*, Raisin depicts modern gig-economy labour where digital platforms, managerial oversight, and precarious working conditions dehumanize workers. Sean's struggle reflects alienation in a contemporary context, and ideological mechanisms function through normalized insecurity and conditional rewards.

The comparative analysis reveals that exploitation is universal. In Pakistan, structural oppression is maintained through caste hierarchies and social conventions, while in Britain, labour is commodified and controlled via technological and managerial apparatuses. Both texts illustrate that inequality is reinforced through a combination of economic dependence and ideological conditioning, showing that class oppression transcends cultural and temporal boundaries. By juxtaposing the two narratives, the study fills a gap in comparative literature, linking South Asian caste-based labour with Western gig-economy labour, thereby highlighting the global relevance of class struggle.

Moreover, the study emphasizes the psychological and moral dimensions of labour exploitation. Sukkhan's hope for her son's education and Sean's eventual refusal to continue working in oppressive conditions demonstrate emerging class consciousness and the human desire for dignity and agency. Literature, therefore, not only documents material deprivation but also provides insight into the subjective experiences of workers, their resilience, and the ways in which oppression is internalized and sometimes resisted.

Through this analysis, it becomes evident that literary texts are valuable tools for understanding socio-economic realities. Rahman and Raisin use narrative strategies to make invisible labour visible, humanizing workers and fostering empathy. Their stories invite readers to critically engage with the social structures that perpetuate inequality, reinforcing Eagleton's (1976) argument that literature exposes the power dynamics shaping human consciousness.

In conclusion, this research demonstrates that Marxist literary criticism, combined with Althusserian theory, provides a robust framework for analyzing both historical and contemporary forms of labour exploitation. The study confirms that while the forms of oppression may differ—caste-based social norms in South Asia versus digital-capitalist labour control in the West—the underlying mechanisms of exploitation, invisibility, and ideological reinforcement are strikingly similar. These findings underscore the universality of class-based inequality and highlight literature's capacity to illuminate, critique, and question the socio-economic and ideological structures that shape human life. By integrating cross-cultural perspectives, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of global labour exploitation and offers a template for further comparative research in literary studies, demonstrating that the struggle for dignity, equity, and recognition is both timeless and borderless.

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