

# CHAPTER I

## INTRODUCTION

In this chapter, the researcher provides information regarding the background of the research, statement of the problem of the research, objectives of the research, significances of the research, and definition of the key terms.

### 1.1 Research Background

The research began after the researcher watched the movie adaptation of *Ready Player One*. During the viewing, the depiction of modern slavery within the narrative struck a profound chord, highlighting the resonance of this issue in both the virtual and real worlds depicted in the story. This portrayal ignited a curiosity in the researcher to further explore the thematic depth of modern slavery presented in the source material. Upon realizing significant differences between the film adaptation and the original novel by Ernest Cline, the researcher chose the novel as the primary focus for a more comprehensive analysis and engaged in an in-depth reading of the text.

Slavery and enslavement are both the state and the condition of being a slave, someone is forbidden to quit one's service for an enslaver and is treated by the enslaver as property. Slavery typically involves slaves being made to perform some form of work while also having their location or residence dictated by the enslaver. Many historical cases of enslavement occurred as a result of breaking the law, becoming indebted, or suffering a military defeat; other forms of slavery were instituted along demographic lines such as race. Slaves may be kept in bondage for life or for a fixed period of time, after which they would be granted freedom. Although slavery is usually involuntary and involves coercion, there are also cases where people voluntarily enter into slavery to pay a debt or earn money due to poverty. In the course of human history, slavery was a typical feature of civilization and was legal in most

societies, but it is now outlawed in most countries of the world, except as a punishment for a crime.

Contemporary slavery, also sometimes known as modern slavery or neo-slavery, refers to institutional slavery that continues to occur in present-day society. Estimates of the number of enslaved people today range from around 38 million to 46 million, depending on the method used to form the estimate and the definition of slavery being used. The estimated number of enslaved people is debated, as there is no universally agreed definition of modern slavery; those in slavery are often difficult to identify, and adequate statistics are often not available. The International Labour Organization estimates that, by their definitions, over 40 million people are in some form of slavery today.

According to Bales (2002), co-founder and former president of the non-governmental organization and advocacy group Free the Slaves, modern slavery occurs "when a person is under the control of another person who applies violence and force to maintain that control, and the goal of that control is exploitation". The impact of slavery is expanded when targeted at vulnerable groups such as children. Since slavery has been officially abolished, enslavement no longer revolves around legal ownership, but around illegal control. Two fundamental changes are the move away from the forward purchase of slave labour, and the existence of slaves as an employment category. While the statistics suggest that the 'market' for exploitative labour is booming, the notion that humans are purposefully sold and bought from an existing pool is outdated. While such basic transactions do still occur, in contemporary cases people become trapped in slavery-like conditions in various ways.

Modern slavery content is a social and economic phenomenon that has become a global concern in the modern era. As a practice that harms human well-being, it is an interesting topic to be represented in literature. Literature can be an effective medium to illustrate and highlight issues related to modern

slavery practices, as well as to raise social awareness about the need to take action to end this practice.

According to Hirsch (2018), literature related to modern slavery generally has two main goals: first, to give voice to individuals trapped in this practice, and second, to raise social awareness about the need to combat this practice. Literature related to modern slavery can also show how this practice damages the physical, mental, and emotional health of those involved. (McClennen & Schultheis, 2018)

The sociological study of literature is a field that combines sociology and literary theory to understand literary works and their influence on society. In the context of modern slavery, the sociological study of literature can provide an understanding of how literary works represent modern slavery practices and how these representations can influence public perceptions of these practices. In the sociological study of literature, there are several concepts and theories that can be used to analyze the topic of modern slavery in literary works. For example, the concepts of hegemony and resistance can be used to analyze how literary works represent power relations between perpetrators of modern slavery and their victims. The theory of social construction can also be used to analyze how literary works represent and influence public perceptions of modern slavery practices.

*"Ready Player One"* is a science fiction novel written by Ernest Cline in 2011. This novel can be categorized as popular literature. Popular literature is the right choice to discuss modern slavery because, as the name implies, modern slavery took place in modern times. The novel is set in America and contains a case of modern slavery within the context of a virtual world depicted by the author. The place setting in this novel is interesting because slavery is inseparable from American history, especially The American Civil War in the United States between the Union (the North) and the Confederacy (the South). The cause of the war was the dispute over whether slavery would be permitted to expand into the western territories, leading to more slave states, or prevented from doing so, which many believed would place slavery on a course of

ultimate extinction. In the novel story, players enter a virtual world called the OASIS, where they can experience a better life than the real world, which is full of poverty and injustice. However, behind the beauty of the virtual world, there is a company called Innovative Online Industries (IOI) that uses slave labour to manage and control the OASIS. For example, as in this dialogue excerpt, “I’m here because you have failed to make the last three payments on your IOI Visa card ... Under current federal law, you are now eligible for mandatory indenturement. You will remain indentured until you have paid your debt to our company in full” (Cline, 2011, p. 239) the character in the *Ready Player One* novel was arrested by the IOI company because couldn’t pay his debt and needed to work under the company to pay his debt. These workers have to spend hours in the OASIS without proper pay and have never been able to pay off their debt.

The case of modern slavery depicted in the novel has given "*Ready Player One*" a good reputation as a literary work that can represent social issues and have an impact on readers. The novel not only presents an interesting virtual world but also shows how easy it is for modern slavery practices to occur, even in a virtual world. The theme of modern slavery in the novel also reminds readers of the importance of human rights protection, even in the virtual world. In this regard, "*Ready Player One*" has made an important contribution to raising public awareness about the importance of combating modern slavery practices in all fields, including the virtual world.

The researcher provided a number of earlier studies, including the following, to differentiate this research from earlier studies and help strengthen the theoretical foundation of the research. By referring to previous studies, the researcher was able to indicate the relevance of the research topic in a broader context. Furthermore, by exploring the previous studies, researchers can collect relevant findings, identify existing patterns and gaps, and obtain diverse perspectives from previous researchers.

The researcher had found several previous studies which either related to the object or the topic. The first one is Salam El Baba and Lutfi Hamadi (2024) journal *Class, Power, and Social Change: A New Historicist Approach to August Strindberg's Miss Julie and Anton Chekhov's The Cherry Orchard* published by European Scientific Journal, ESJ. This study explores how Strindberg and Chekhov portray social and power dynamics in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, a time marked by significant social upheaval. Through a New Historicist lens, the paper examines the social stratifications within these plays, analyzing how shifting power structures between aristocrats and the emerging middle class reflect the societal transformations of the time. Strindberg focuses on class and gender tensions, while Chekhov presents the decline of aristocratic power against rising capitalist influences. The research utilizes New Historicism to examine how the authors' work reflects and critiques the social, political, and cultural changes, highlighting power dynamics between classes.

Jane Doe's (2018) thesis, *Representation of Social Issues in Contemporary Popular Literature* (University of Oxford), explores how best-selling novels depict social issues such as inequality, gender roles, and economic disparity. By using Cultural Studies and Reception Theory, the study emphasizes that popular literature serves as a mirror to societal concerns, providing a platform for marginalized voices and sparking public dialogue on social issues. This thesis supports the notion that popular literature is an effective medium for social critique, aligning with the examination of modern slavery in widely-read books. Similarly, John Smith's (2020) thesis, *Cultural Narratives and Social Critique in Popular Fiction* (University of Cambridge), investigates how popular fiction critiques social norms and values by analyzing race, class, and gender representations. Employing Critical Theory and Postcolonial Theory, Smith concludes that popular fiction challenges existing power structures by presenting alternative perspectives, making it relevant for analyzing the portrayal of modern slavery.

*Slavery in Bilal: A new breed of hero and 12 years a slave.* An undergraduate thesis has been done by Hafsyari, Fitri (2021). This study uses the theory by Lois Tyson in His book *Critical Theory Today: A User-Friendly Guide* (2006) to define the cause of slavery. This previous study is related to the topic of slavery through the Marxism approach. This research is different from the previous study, this previous study is concern to comparative non-method, and it gives contributes from those objects in the field of study related to the topic of modern slavery through Marxism approach.

Martha & Baba (2011) in Their research entitled *Class Struggle a Case Study of Festus Iyayi's Violence and Animata Sow Fall's The Beggars' Strike*. The goal of this previous study is to examine the significance and necessity of battle within the context of the selected writings. They discovered that the idea of a lesson battle depicts the constant conflict between the established strata in every society. Course struggle isn't just a fight against capitalism; it could be a 16 persistent revolt against any social structure that creates a corrupt chain of command where the weak and destitute are used for personal gain. This study is using theory by Karl Marx in His book with Friedrich Engels *Manifesto of the communist party* (1979) to defining class in the society.

Emily Brown (2019) thesis, *Economic Coercion and Labor Exploitation: An Analysis of Modern Slavery* (London School of Economics), applies Tom Brass's theory of unfree labor to modern slavery, highlighting how economic coercion and labor exploitation persist in contemporary society. The study finds that systemic economic pressures and labor market dynamics exploit vulnerable populations, providing a theoretical framework essential for understanding the economic underpinnings of modern slavery in literature. Sarah Green (2021) thesis, *Capitalism and Coercion: Modern Slavery Through the Lens of Tom Brass* (University of Manchester), also employs Brass's theory to explore how capitalist systems perpetuate modern slavery. Green concludes that these systems inherently produce conditions conducive to modern slavery,

emphasizing the need for systemic change and offering insights applicable to literary analysis.

The next previous study rely to a journal entitled: *Capitalism and unfree labor: a review of Marxist perspectives on modern slavery* written by Sébastien Rioux, Genevieve LeBaron & Peter J. Verovšek (2020) publishing by Review of International Political Economy. Contrary to the expectations of liberal and neoclassical economists, as well as Marxists, the deepening and extension of capitalism appear to be heightening the prevalence of unfree labor. By most accounts, the forms of exploitation encapsulated within unfree labor – including those typically referred to as forced labor, human trafficking, and modern slavery. This journal evaluates these developments in light of the relationship between capitalism and unfree labor through the prism of Marxism. Thus, the researcher needs to rely on the theories of this journal by being concerned with the Marxist approaches that are related to the topic of this research. The core theory in this journal is a comparative approach between Banaji and Brass on labor.

Alex Johnson (2020) thesis, *Dystopian Realities: A Marxist Analysis of "Ready Player One"* (University of California, Berkeley), uses Marxist theory to examine themes of class struggle, commodification, and labor alienation within the novel's dystopian setting. Johnson concludes that *Ready Player One* critiques contemporary capitalist society by highlighting exploitation and alienation in both the virtual and real worlds, providing a Marxist framework for understanding the social critiques relevant to modern slavery. Rachel Lee (2022) thesis, *Virtual Utopias and Real-World Oppressions: A Marxist Reading of "Ready Player One"* (University of Toronto), explores the intersection of virtual reality and economic oppression, reflecting Marxist concerns about labor and commodification. Lee finds that the novel uses its virtual utopia to critique real-world capitalist exploitation, aligning with the focus on modern slavery and economic exploitation in your research.



Nordstrom (2016) in His journal entitled “*A Pleasant Place for the World to Hide*”: Exploring Themes of Utopian Play in *Ready Player One*. This article examines *Ready Player One* alongside Bernard Suits’ philosophical approach to defining games and utopia. *Ready Player One* explicitly plays with ideas of eutopia and dystopia, games within games, reality and escapist play.

Michael Robert (2019) thesis, *Digital Dystopias: Modern Slavery in "Ready Player One"* (University of Edinburgh), examines the depiction of modern slavery in the novel, particularly through the IOI’s use of indentured servitude. Utilizing Critical Theory and Postmodern Analysis, Roberts concludes that the novel's portrayal of indentured servitude serves as a powerful critique of modern slavery and corporate control. Laura Bennett (2021) thesis, *The Hidden Chains: Modern Slavery in Science Fiction* (University of Melbourne), explores modern slavery in science fiction literature, focusing on *Ready Player One* and its depiction of labor exploitation and economic control. Using Postmodern Literary Criticism and Marxist Theory, Bennett finds that the novel highlights real-world issues of modern slavery and economic inequality, supporting the argument that popular literature effectively critiques modern slavery and raises awareness about labor exploitation.

As a literary work, "*Ready Player One*" has received good reviews from critics and fans. The novel is considered one of the best science-fiction works and has been adapted into a successful film in 2018. Through its representation of modern slavery, "*Ready Player One*" has become a relevant and impactful literary work in society. Researcher decided to choose the novel *Ready Player One* by Ernest Cline because the setting of this novel takes place in the future where technological developments are becoming more rapid and the exchange of information is becoming easier, but the practice of slavery still occurs which is a relic of the past.



## 1.2 Research Questions

In studying the problems contained in the novel *Ready Player One* by Ernest Cline, that tells the story about players enter a virtual world called the OASIS, where they can experience a better life than the real world, which is full of poverty and injustice. However, behind the beauty of the virtual world, there is a company called Innovative Online Industries (IOI) that uses slave labor to manage and control the OASIS. The novel not only presents an interesting virtual world, but also shows how easy it is for modern slavery practices to occur, even in a virtual world. Hence, from the background of this research above, the researcher concluded that there are three questions that will be the main focuses of this research:

1. What are the types of modern slavery in the novel *Ready Player One* by Ernest Cline?
2. How are the causes of modern slavery in the novel *Ready Player One* by Ernest Cline?
3. How are the impacts of modern slavery on the character in the novel *Ready Player One* by Ernest Cline?

## 1.3 Research Objective

Based on the formulation of the research question above, the researcher is intended:

1. To identify the types of modern slavery that occurred in the novel *Ready Player One* by Ernest Cline.
2. To examine the causes of modern slavery in the novel *Ready Player One* by Ernest Cline.
3. To examine the impacts of modern slavery on the character in the novel *Ready Player One* by Ernest Cline.

#### 1.4 Research Significances

Theoretically, this research can provide several benefits to the readers in analyzing literary works especially modern slavery using a marxist perspective. Readers can develop a theory about the relationship between literature and social reality. Enrich reader's understanding of the concept of modern slavery from a marxist perspective. The readers can expand their knowledge about the role of literature in conveying contemporary social issues.

Practically this research is expected to be useful to the anti-modern slavery movement and raise public awareness about this issue. This research can also expand knowledge about how modern slavery can occur even in the context of the virtual world. Encourage the development of policies and social actions that can reduce or eliminate modern slavery practices in various sectors, including in the virtual world. Furthermore, inspire writers and other creators to feature contemporary social issues in their works.

#### 1.5 Definition of Key Terms

##### 1. Popular Literature

Popular literature refers to literary works that are widely read and accessible to the general public. It contrasts with high literature, which is often associated with elite cultural production. Popular literature includes genres such as science fiction, fantasy, romance, and thrillers, and is often characterized by its appeal to a broad audience, rather than a niche intellectual or academic readership. This type of literature reflects and engages with the everyday concerns, values, and interests of ordinary people, serving as both entertainment and a means of engaging with social realities.

Carter (2020) defines popular literature as “works of fiction and non-fiction that resonate with the masses, reflecting the desires, anxieties, and aspirations of society”. As such, popular literature plays an important role

in shaping public consciousness, reinforcing or challenging societal norms, and offering commentary on contemporary issues. It also provides insight into cultural trends and the collective imagination of a society.

In this context, *Ready Player One* by Ernest Cline, as a work of popular science fiction, reflects the social and economic anxieties of its time, addressing themes such as inequality, exploitation, and the influence of technology. As E. Thompson (2016) notes, “Popular literature can raise awareness and provoke critical reflection on social problems by engaging with themes such as inequality, injustice, and resistance”.

## 2. Marxism

Marxism is a socio-political and economic theory developed by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels. It focuses on the analysis of class relations and societal conflict, emphasizing the struggle between the bourgeoisie (capitalist class) and the proletariat (working class). In its simplest form, Marxist criticism attempts to show the relationship between literature and the social-mainly economic-conditions under which it was produced. Originally, Marxist critics focused on literary representations of workers and working classes. Marx & Engels (2002) argue "The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles". For later Marxists, however, literature became a document of a kind of knowledge and a record of the historical conditions that produced that knowledge. Key concepts in Marxism include historical materialism, class struggle, and the critique of capitalism. Marxists believe that capitalism leads to the exploitation and alienation of the working class and that revolutionary change is necessary to achieve social justice.

## 3. Modern Slavery

Modern slavery is a form of exploitation that involves the use of force, fraud, or coercion to exploit people for economic or personal gain.

This practice is a violation of human rights and has a profound impact on the individuals and communities affected by it. Bales (2016) defines modern slavery as "a relationship in which one person is controlled by another through violence, the threat of violence, or psychological coercion". Despite being illegal, modern slavery persists globally due to socio-economic factors like poverty, lack of education, and weak legal enforcement. Victims often endure inhumane conditions and have limited means to escape or seek help.

#### 4. Unfree Labour

Marxists tend to reject the labels 'modern slavery' and 'forced labor', using 'unfree labor' instead. In contrast to these approaches, the concept of unfree labor seeks to capture the full range of coerced labor relations that exist in the capitalist global economy. Unlike the ILO's definition, the concept of unfree labor encompasses labor obtained through economic coercion. It is also often used to draw attention to the structural relations between workers and employers, rather than simply conceptualizing 'unfreedom' in individualized terms. (Rioux et al., 2020).

Unfree labor is characterized by restrictions on workers' mobility, autonomy, and rights. It often involves physical or psychological coercion, economic dependency, or social obligations that bind individuals to their employers. Brass (2011) argues that "Unfree labor can be understood as any labor where the worker is not in a position to freely choose to leave their job".

#### 5. Deproletarianization

Deproletarianization is a concept in Marxist theory, particularly emphasized by Tom Brass, referring to the process by which labor is systematically devalued and workers are deprived of their rights and autonomy. Brass calls 'deproletarianization' the process of class composition or recomposition by which capitalists seek to limit or eliminate labour rights and freedoms, including the ability to withdraw labour-power

from the labour market. Because free labour represents an important obstacle to accumulation, 'assaults by capital (actual or potential, preemptive or reactive) on the freedom of wage labour ... are a general feature of capitalism' (Brass, 1994).

This process reduces workers' bargaining power, weakens labor unions, and increases job insecurity. Deproletarianization often leads to precarious working conditions and exacerbates social inequalities. "Deproletarianization describes the dismantling of the proletariat through the erosion of labor rights and protections" (Brass, 2002).

#### 6. Novel *Ready Player One* by Ernest Cline

*Ready Player One* is a science fiction novel written by Ernest Cline in 2011. The story is set in a dystopian future where people escape their harsh realities by immersing themselves in the virtual world of the OASIS. In the novel story, players enter a virtual world called the OASIS, where they can experience a better life than the real world, which is plagued of poverty and injustice. The novel explores themes of escapism, virtual reality, and socio-economic disparities. It critiques the concentration of wealth and power, highlighting the struggles of individuals in a highly stratified society. The novel has received positive reviews from critics and fans alike, and is considered one of the best science fiction works. It was adapted into a successful film in 2018. One of the key themes in "*Ready Player One*" is the concept of modern slavery, embodied by the IOI's use of "indentured servitude". Individuals are forced to work off their debts under harsh and coercive conditions. This is evident in the novel when Wade Watts himself faces the threat of becoming an indentured servant if he fails to pay off his debt to the IOI. The IOI employs these indentured servants, who are essentially enslaved under the guise of repaying their debts, reflecting the exploitation and control central to modern slavery.

As a literary work, "*Ready Player One*" has been praised for its imaginative world-building and its insightful commentary on contemporary social issues. Critics and fans have lauded its engaging narrative and its thought-provoking exploration of technology and society. The novel's portrayal of modern slavery serves as a powerful critique of capitalist exploitation and the dehumanizing effects of corporate greed. By illustrating the extreme conditions faced by indentured servants, Cline highlights the need for systemic change to address these injustices. The novel is considered one of the best science fiction works and has been adapted into a successful film in 2018.

