

# Dismembering the Issues of Capitalism, Human Rights, and Mental Health of Irish People in the Novel *Normal People* by Sally Rooney

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## ARTICLE INFO

### Keywords:

cultural impact;  
ideology;  
Ireland;  
youngsters

### Article History:

Received : 17/10/2024

Revised : 30/10/2024

Accepted : 23/11/2024

Available Online:

30/11/2024

## ABSTRACT

The capitalist ideology has been critiqued in various disciplines, including literature, especially when executed by tyrant governments or influential individuals. This article examines how modern discourse, such as the novel *Normal People* by Sally Rooney, represents issues of capitalism in Ireland, which impact the rights of its people and their access to mental health. The study is a qualitative scrutiny of the novel, applying the Marxist Theory of Ideology by Louis Althusser to investigate such representations. The primary data from the novel and the secondary information from other sources are interpreted to investigate three main questions: How do *Normal People* portray capitalism in Ireland, how does this ideology impact the individual rights of its people, and how does it affect access to mental health problems? The study results indicate that the novel portrays the pervasiveness of capitalist ideology in the hearts of Irish people, affecting their rights to live and the freedom of expression, and the practice of capitalism has a substantial impact on Irish youngsters' mental health. Due to the limitations of the methods and data comprehensiveness, further studies on *Normal People* may consider alternative literary lenses, such as pragmatic and other analytical approaches, looking at sociocultural institutions and systems.

**How to cite (in APA style):** Ferdinal, F., Sudarmoko, Dewi, C., & Oktavianus, O. (2024). Dismembering the Issues of Capitalism, Human Rights, and Mental Health of Irish People in the Novel *Normal People* by Sally Rooney. *OKARA: Jurnal Bahasa dan Sastra*, 18(2), 266-284. <https://doi.org/10.19105/ojbs.v18i2.15659>

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The intersection of capitalism, human rights, and mental health is a complex and multifaceted topic. This synthesis explores how these elements interact and influence each other, drawing insights from various research papers. Additionally, the role of fiction in understanding mental health issues related to identity (Bhugra, 2004) is examined. Literary works serve as entertaining reading for their audience and broaden their horizons and perspectives regarding the good and bad aspects of the themes or messages conveyed in a piece or the quality of the depictions produced. *Normal People*, a novel by Irish author Sally Rooney, is one of the literary works that falls into this category. This novel depicts the lives of the young generation in Ireland amidst the onslaught of capitalism, which impacts the community's rights and mental health (Yang, 2023). What needs to be examined is how

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the complex themes of capitalism, human rights, and mental health in this work provide a thorough exploration of how these issues are intertwined in the narrative.

Born in Mayo, Ireland, in 1991, Sally Rooney spends most of her life in Dublin. She has published some novels, including *Conversations with Friends*, *Normal People*, *Beautiful Worlds*, and *Where Are You*, respectively in 2017, 2018, and 2021. She has then been claimed to be a Millennial Young Writer. Her novel *Normal People* centers on Marianne and Connell, who struggle to live in a capitalistic society. The novel, made into a movie and TV adaptation and translated into many languages worldwide, earned critical reviews and appraisals from many segments of society, including Rooney's attempts to instill Marxist views and feminist elements in it (Mendía, 2023).

What is capitalism? The Oxford Dictionary defines capitalism as an economic-political system, asserting that the industry and trade of a nation are controlled by private entities aiming to achieve profit. Scholars, including Diener and Seligman (2004), argue that this system is undoubtedly very beneficial for ordinary people and workers, but this system may be seen as detrimental to them. Regardless of the profits and losses of this system, its existence cannot be denied due to its significant and influential role in almost every country, not only in developing countries but also in developed ones. Capitalism as a system will be viewed positively by those who use and believe in it. The assessment of good or evil arises after the system is implemented in a particular society and has a wide-ranging positive and negative impact on its community. Capitalism benefits the capitalist group but harms the worker group, or they stand in between (Wright, 2000). Although European civilization and several regions worldwide began and were shaped by the presence of capitalism, members of society who live and grow in this environment also experience the negative impacts of this ideology. Many researchers suggest that Sally Rooney is one of the female writers who pays special attention to this issue (Darling, 2021). Scientists from various fields consider the problem of capitalism a compelling topic for discussion, not only from economic and political perspectives but also from other social, cultural, and literary viewpoints.

Just like other great works that convey a range of messages and information to their readers, *Normal People* does the same, including universal themes such as family, society, school, the relationship between bosses and employees, scholarships, the relationship between men and women, and many other themes that can be observed. Sally Rooney weaves these themes and issues together through literary elements such as theme, plot, characters, setting, symbols, etc. These elements depict major issues such as capitalism, human rights, and mental health.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Modern discourses present the intricate relationships among capitalism, human rights, and mental health. They emphasize how these concerns impact and influence the lives of contemporary people, making it a valuable text for literary analysis within the framework of social critique. Scholars in different fields of study have reminded readers of the significant impact of ideology on people (Ferdinal (2013; 2021; 2023), Oktavianus (2024)) and of capitalism on society, such as the relationship between European crisis and capitalism (Blokker, 2014), many authors use the issues of capitalism, human rights and mental health as related issues to look at the impact of the economic system on individuals and communities, especially during the neo-liberalism. For instance, Fulk (2017) argues that literature becomes a utopian space beyond the hegemony of Western liberalism. In line with

Fulk, Darling (2021) asserts that capitalism and social media are conjoined forces of dehumanization.

Furthermore, other scholars look at the impact of capitalism on communities. For example, while Newby (2021) studied the representation of starvation in Victorian literature, Asl & Abdullah (2017) found that the third-world country's imaginary production has been aligned with Western marketing demand for production and consumption. What the scholars discussed deals with the imaginary impacts of capitalism on human rights.

Human rights scholars and literary critics have investigated how literature represents human rights from many different subjects and aspects, either the perpetrators, the victims, or the ways they are depicted. The most recent focus is on how the human body has been used as the domain where tensions are exposed and dramatized (Lascelles, 2022). For example, Deyab and Elshaikh (2022) investigated how Palestinian children's rights were violated and spiritually enslaved. Furthermore, de Bruijn and Murphy (2018) argued that the painful and shameful memories of slavery represented the nature of slavery and investment in global capitalism. In science fiction, diseases like cancer have been used as the metaphorical sign of consumption and the proliferation of capitalism (Hart, 2022).

Then, while Heidarizadeh (2015) looked at the connection between trauma in literature and psychoanalysis within the influence of the economy, scholars such as Kennedy (2012), Daukšaitė (2013), Larsen (2015), Abubakar (2017), Aberle (2021), and Prabhat (2023) scrutinized the representations of mental illness arisen by some different factors respectively in the form of madness in drama of Brian Friel, traumatic experiences in fiction, traumatic memories through literature, and mental illness depiction in young adult literature, and the work of Silvia Plath. They pay attention to the impact of the economy, society, and culture on the people's psyche. Other than representations, some scholars have studied literature's role in reconciling trauma among individuals and societies (Buskova, 2013). Leaving the representation of mental illness, Laing & Frost (2017) focused on how women's travel narratives represent women's transformation and self-discovery. Others like Elnahla and McKay (2020), Al-Jumali and van der Weiger (2020), and Carney & Robertson (2022) investigated mental health problems in the workplace, the language of fever in poetry, and the impact of reading fiction on mental health.

Despite the abundance of writing on ideology, human rights, and mental health, significant gaps remain in the existing literature. While the above scholars have explored the broader implications of the impact of ideology, including capitalism, on people's lives, little attention has been paid to the communal and social responses to the rights and mental health of modern narratives by women, including Sally Rooney's *Normal People*. How does Rooney portray the collective action of the Irish people in the face of capitalism? Additionally, there is a need for further examination of the dynamics of capitalism in normal *people*. While the separate analysis of the interplay between capitalism and human rights, or capitalism and mental health, is often the focus of critical analysis, the impacts of capitalism on the rights of Irish people and their access to mental health are understudied.

Furthermore, the rights and health dimensions of the novel have not been adequately explored. Rooney's representation of capitalism is deeply rooted in her understanding of the sociopolitical environment as a determinant of the Irish people's lives. However, few scholars have applied contemporary Marxist criticism to her work. A Marxist reading of *Normal People* might offer new insights into how Rooney's portrayal of capitalism reflects broader concerns about humanity's relationship with human rights and health. Therefore, studies on the interplay between capitalism, human rights, and mental health are important. This article focuses on three points of representation, namely, the way *Normal People*

portrays the issue of capitalism in Ireland, the effect of capitalist ideology on the rights of the people, and the people's access to mental health services. In brief, this writing aims to study how *Normal People* depicts capitalism and its impact on Irish citizens' rights and mental health.

### 3. METHOD

This study uses a qualitative perspective to examine how Sally Rooney critiques the existence of capitalist ideology and its impact on Irish society. By employing the ideology theory proposed by Louis Althusser and supporting concepts such as human rights and mental health, this study will utilize primary data from Sally Rooney's novel *Normal People* and information related to capitalism from various secondary sources. The primary data is collected from the novel *Normal People* through an in-depth reading of the work and marking sections of the text that relate to issues of capitalism, human rights, and mental health. To support this primary data, the researchers gathered additional data from sources outside the main text, including articles, books, research reports, and others. The researchers used instruments and research questions related to capitalism, human rights, and mental health themes to obtain accurate and sufficient data. Data analysis techniques are carried out through several steps: first, identifying the main themes in the primary text related to the themes of capitalism, human rights, and mental health, and grouping the data according to these three themes; second, coding the data and tagging the text according to the established themes, third, analyzing the data thematically to find patterns, themes, and meanings in the text in line with the research objectives, and finally, interpreting the findings for concluding. To ensure the reliability and validity of the data, the researchers employed several methods, such as data triangulation through varied secondary data sources to corroborate the research findings, peer review to obtain feedback from experts regarding the data and analysis conducted, and inter-coder reliability to test consistency in data coding through the use of multiple coders.

Althusser (2016), in his writing titled "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatus," emphasizes the relationship between the state and its society. He questions why the people comply with the government, the rules that are made, and why there are no protests against capitalism. He believes that the formation of government is closely related to capitalism. The existence of a state is inseparable from the capitalist mode of production that is established to protect its interests. To ensure the continuity of a government and maintain its objectives, the state implements two mechanisms: the Ideological State Apparatus (ISA) and the Repressive State Apparatus (RSA). ISA is a country that establishes an ideology that must be adhered to by all citizens. They must understand and act by following that ideology. RSA is a state institution, such as the police and the courts, that is used by the state to ensure that the ideology and rules of the state are implemented correctly. Through these two tools, the state can compel all citizens to behave according to the will of the state. The application of ISA and RSA is then related to the concepts of human rights as introduced by UDHR.

Human rights are the fundamental rights and freedoms that belong to all individuals, regardless of nationality, ethnicity, gender, religion, social status, and so on, as illustrated in Figure 1. These rights include civil and political rights, such as the freedom of speech and assembly, economic rights, and social and cultural rights, such as the right to education, employment, and a decent life. These fundamental rights protect individuals from abuse of power, promote equality and justice, and ensure everyone can achieve a dignified life.

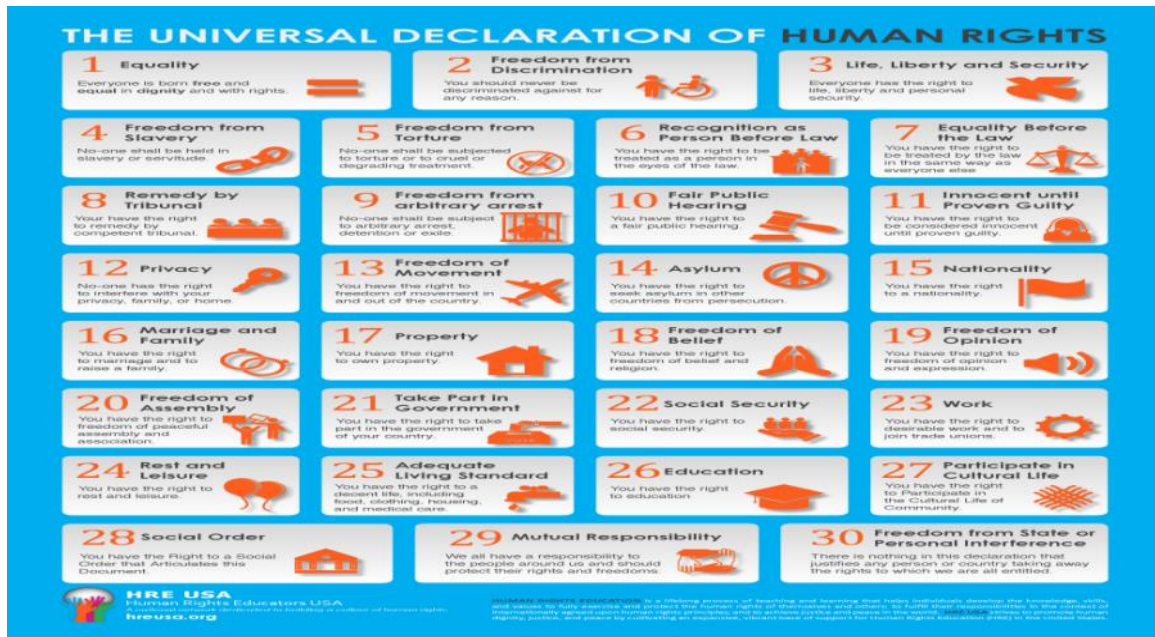


Fig. 1. The 30 Rights in the UDHR  
(Source: <https://hreusa.org/posters/>)

While rights are given, mental health is internally obtained. It refers to a state of well-being in which individuals realize their potential, cope with everyday life stresses, work productively, and contribute to their community. Generally, well-being theories include hedonism, objective list theories, and desire theories, as seen in Figure 2.



Fig. 2. The Three Main Theories of Well Beings  
Source: Chappell, Meissner and MacAskill (2024)

To be used in this analysis, the desire theories by Chris Heathwood (2015) hold that well-being consists of the satisfaction (minus frustration) of desires or preferences. Desire theories may be either *restricted* or *unrestricted* in scope. Unrestricted theories count *all* of your desires without exception. Restricted desire theories claim that only desires in some restricted class—perhaps those that are in some sense about one's life affect one's well-being. Well-being is also affected by one's Bizarre Desires and Changing Preferences.

## 4. RESULTS

Sally Rooney, in her second novel, *Normal People*, depicts the practice of capitalist ideology in Irish society and the impact it has on the lives of the Irish people. By highlighting two main characters, Marianne and Connell, Rooney shows that Irish society has faced significant issues related to human rights and the psychological well-being of its citizens. Although Ireland has lived in a capitalist world for a very long time, this ideology, according to Rooney, has negatively affected its people. In general, *Normal People* depicts the existence and impact of capitalist ideology in Ireland on this nation's society. Wrapped in elements of fiction such as setting, characters, themes, plot, and other components, this novel conveys Sally Rooney's critique of the application of ideology by the Irish government in its governance. This work raises some themes that comprehensively address capitalist issues, ranging from capitalism and the 2008 financial crisis to the neglect of housing development. This practice of capitalism has an impact on the violation of citizens' rights and disrupts their mental health. The process of the impact is organized by looking at the dynamics of capitalism and the disruption of the Irish economy. To examine the journey of capitalism and its impacts in this work, the analysis is divided into three parts: the representation of capitalism, its impact on human rights, and its effects on society's mental health.

### 4.1 The Dynamics of Capitalism

One of the challenges of capitalism during the 2008 financial crisis for the Republic of Ireland was navigating the drastic changes in unstable economic and social conditions. As a result of the 2008 financial crisis, the public no longer knew the identity and direction of the Republic of Ireland as a nation. At this point, Rooney's statement becomes increasingly relevant, reflecting on who they were and where the country was headed. Rooney brought this up in the debate between Connell and Marianne:

"I'm not sure about the job prospects, though. Oh, who cares? The economy's fucked anyway. The laptop screen has gone black now and he taps the trackpad to light it up again. The college applications webpage stares back at him." (Rooney, 2018, pp 31-32)

Rooney depicts the impact of the 2008 financial crisis through the conversation between Connell and Marianne. It implies uncertainty regarding job prospects and highlights the uncertainty surrounding the future of the Republic of Ireland as a whole. In structured, ironic, and sarcastic dialogues, statements about job prospects clash with Marianne's responses. According to Connell, the economic chaos reflects how job prospects cannot help society achieve the desired economic well-being. This conversation also highlights that government oppression is a critical element involving aspects of class, unemployment, inequality, and the expansion of capitalism. Through a narrative that illustrates the scene's visual, Rooney depicts the image of the 2008 economic crisis through symbolism from a college application web page.

The symbol of the college application web page becomes a powerful representation. College applications are generally associated with hopes and aspirations, but in an economic crisis, this symbol transforms into a manifestation of massive change. Rooney takes advantage of the scene to convey the situation's complexity, where individuals hope for higher education as a step towards a bright future. On the contrary, this situation leaves them trapped in a different reality. The characters she depicts represent this contradiction.

They fail to understand each other and engage in a one-sided dialogue about the direction of their national ideology. At first, the solid foundation and promise of economic success for the Republic of Ireland seemed convincing. However, ironically, it became a trigger for destruction. Indirectly, Rooney explains that the downfall began when weaknesses in the previously considered solid economic structure became a major issue. The idea also opens our eyes to the inadequacies of the financial system of the Republic of Ireland, which has evaded the impacts of the European Union-scale crisis.

On the contrary, the inability of the Republic of Ireland's financial system during the crisis highlights the importance of conducting evaluations and improvements in a country's economic structure. Temporary success gained from an economic surge can be a dangerous illusion if strong foundations are not well established. Rooney reminds us of the importance of understanding and addressing the weaknesses of the economic system while also questioning how a fragile foundation can lead to a collapse involving all the countries in the European Union. While highlighting the economic consequences of the 2008 financial crisis, she also explores the underlying causes of the problem. Rooney highlights that the Republic of Ireland failed to recognize the risks of aggressive and uncontrolled economic development through cooperation with the European Union.

From the context of the 2008 financial crisis, as depicted in her work, Rooney critiques the excessive optimism that swept through society during rapid economic growth. Considering how the Republic of Ireland views trade between the United States and the European Union as a catalyst for the country's progress, the 2008 financial crisis revealed how the nation collapsed despite engaging in global cooperation. Rooney responded to it by creating her critique through a conversation between characters. Rooney's work shows that the 2008 financial crisis involved aspects that are not solely related to the economy. It also involves social structures that contradict ideology. On the contrary, the belief in the transformation that will keep the Republic of Ireland in success has led to destruction accompanied by division among community groups.

The capitalism of the Republic of Ireland has experienced a deadly failure. Not only does it cripple the economy of the community, but it also undermines the public's trust in the government's ideals. With the onset of the 2008 financial crisis, the case has legitimized the skeptical views in Europe. For Rooney, the expansion of the European Union is too hasty, and the single currency cannot bear such a great diversity of countries. The impact of the banking crisis has caused the Republic of Ireland to become once again subordinate to the vision of European Union capitalism, which was previously held as the highest ideal (Simpson, 2019). Wells (2009, pp. 166–167) explains in the world of capitalism, everyone will receive the minimum education, health care, and training necessary. They will also be insured against illness and accidents. There will be an efficient organization that can help balance the number of jobs. The number of people ready to work means that there will be no one in need of financial assistance like beggars and no one asking for such help. However, if there is someone without money, jobs are not available. Suppose the number of jobs in that area suddenly decreases. In that case, capitalism will assist that person so everyone can live happily and prosperously.

However, with the banking crisis shaking Europe, the rights that should have been accessible to the public are certainly not fully realized. This situation reinforces the position of the Republic of Ireland as increasingly confined within the ideas of European Union capitalism. Subsequently, this cooperation also provides a dogma for the political elite to adhere to the established rules. The 2008 financial crisis not only undermined the stability of nations but also had devastating effects on society (Rees & O'Brennan, 2019, p. 597).

The pleasures enjoyed during the Celtic Tiger era, as represented by Rooney through his characters, challenge the existing status quo. One of them is the case of haunted housing.

In Rooney's view, haunted housing refers to the abandonment of properties. Especially those included in the elite category and large housing projects, houses were left empty or unused after the explosion of the 2008 financial crisis. At the peak of the 2008 financial crisis, many investors and property owners experienced a sudden drop in the value of their properties. Meanwhile, market demand is declining drastically. This situation occurred because many properties were previously purchased or developed with the hope that their values would continue to rise, making them attractive for investors to invest in (O'Callaghan et al., 2014, pp. 122–123). However, when property prices suddenly drop, many buyers or renters lose interest in making that property a medium for investment.

As a result, many properties remain empty and unused. The property was abandoned by its owner without the ability to maintain or sell it at a reasonable price (Kitchin et al., 2014). According to Rooney, banks in the Republic of Ireland are considered responsible for this situation due to their involvement in providing excessive and careless credit to property developers and investors. The government's decision has also been highlighted because inappropriate economic policies have fueled property speculation and failed to anticipate the negative impacts that have occurred. This is reflected in the figures represented by Rooney, where the abandoned houses are neglected due to the policies of the banks and the government.

Rooney describes the negative impact of the policies of the Bank and the government through the empty houses in Carricklea. These vacant homes have become a concrete symbol of policies that harm the community. The depiction of empty and abandoned houses is also closely related to the actual housing issues in the novel. Similarly, Connell and Marianne's visit to the abandoned houses in Carricklea creates a powerful image of the negative impact of government policies and banking practices on people's lives. In his quote, Rooney highlights the damage of the system through Connell and Marianne's discussion about the ghost estate.

"Last week, Connell mentioned something called 'the ghost.' Marianne had never heard of it before she had to ask him what it was. ... The ghost, he said. The ghost estate, Mountain View. It's like, right behind the school. Marianne had been vaguely aware of some construction on the land behind the school, but she didn't know there was a housing estate there now, or that no one lived in it. People go drinking there, Connell added." (Rooney, 2018, p. 45)

The term 'ghost' refers to the real condition of housing developments that have been built but remain unoccupied. This reflects the housing crisis that emerged as part of the financial crisis of 2008. With the economic collapse, the demand for new homes has plummeted. Many abandoned developments have turned it into a haunted housing area (O'Callaghan et al., 2014, p. 122). Haunted housing has become a symbol of economic collapse, representing wasted resources and failed investments. The construction followed by a sudden abandonment also reflects the volatility of the housing market during the crisis. The idea is expressed through anecdotes of people drinking in quiet places. These anecdotes illustrate how the locals take over these secluded locations.

Meanwhile, the accumulation of unreasonable properties reflects a certain capitalist madness, as Connell's question, "Why not just distribute them if they can't sell these houses?" (Rooney, 2018, p. 46). This question explores the injustice in property ownership.



It reflects the conflict between the high demand for housing and the community's inability to access it. Rooney raises critical questions about the relationship between property, economic policy, and capitalism through his characters. Rooney highlights the dialogue between Connell and Marianne as his skepticism towards the capitalist system that allows for the accumulation of property without considering the needs of society. Her work uses the haunted house scene as a defining element of the financial crisis.

From the context of the 2008 financial crisis, as depicted in his work, Rooney critiques the excessive optimism that swept through society during rapid economic growth. In this case, its main focus is the lack of awareness regarding long-term consequences. She questions to what extent society and the government can see the real impact of rapid economic growth. Through this narrative, Rooney illustrates that excessive hope without consideration can lead to unexpected destruction. The madness of consumerism and waste during the Celtic Tiger period highlights the central role of an unregulated economy. Rooney describes how the urge to engage in excessive consumption and waste can reinforce materialistic values.

Although Rooney widely criticizes the failure of capitalism, she also uplifts the positive sides of capitalism. For example, the materialistic values of the character Marianne become a symbol of the Celtic Tiger's success. Marianne reflects that excessive consumerism among the elite is not only a personal choice but also influences the views and values of the general public. This is connected to the policies during the Celtic Tiger era. In that era of economic prosperity, the elites created an exaggerated and boastful socio-political image. Marianne, as a symbol of a life, is blessed with prosperity. It reflects on how social norms and values of society at that time were formed. The consumerist behaviour adopted by Marianne is not just an individual action but a reflection of what is perceived as the path to success and the desired lifestyle. Aside from the benefits the ideology of capitalism caused to the country, Rooney is concerned more about its harmful effects, including the deprivation of the Irish people's rights.

## 4.2 Irish People's Rights

Sally Rooney does not explicitly use characters who repressively impose capitalist ideology on Irish society. Instead, she depicts the impact of implementing this ideology on the community through the novel's characters. The repression in this work is evident in several themes of life, including the impact of capitalist ideology on the rights of Irish citizens and its influence on their mental health, as recorded in Irish literature about the uncertainties of life and rights (Sen, 2019). The capitalist ideology deeply rooted in Irish society has a wide-ranging impact on its members, including the emergence of social classes (rich, poor, or marginalized), individualism, and competition. In the process, this practice impacts the rights of citizens to live their lives and their freedom of expression regarding race and property rights in Irish literature (Powell, 2023). The conflict between these two groups is illustrated through themes such as social justice issues, human rights violations in conflict, gender-based violence, and rights to identity and culture.

*Normal People* represents marginalized society through its characters, Connell and his mother, Lorraine. They depict the lives and experiences of marginalized or discriminated groups, including how they are treated by society and their struggles to obtain their rights. Rooney describes marginalized groups as members of society affected by capitalism. Figures like Connell, Lorraine, and other marginalized characters serve as pawns for Rooney to illustrate the situation and conditions of Irish society when practicing capitalism.

Their voices are those of the unheard and disaffecting. Wealthy communities become the center, and they target marginalized groups. They exploit them to gain moral, material benefits, or even sex. Exploitation of the body is another issue that Rooney raises in *Normal People* (Dewi et al., 2024). Wealth does not always bring happiness to its owner. Wealth can also become an obstacle for them to enjoy life. Rooney points out that to achieve enjoyment in life. People can use others for their interests or deliberately allow themselves to be used for certain purposes. For instance, Connell's mother suspects that Connell has used his secret girlfriend, Marianne, to satisfy his desires. She believes her son benefits from Marianne's body to satisfy his biological needs (p. 70).

Furthermore, Rooney also raises the issue of social injustice, such as economic inequality, access to education, healthcare, or other essential services within Irish society. This injustice and inequality demonstrate how it affects the rights of citizens from both social groups. Focusing on the lives of high school students, Rooney illustrates how economic disparities influence these children in making life choices, whether to continue their studies or work after graduating. The choice of schools varies depending on their financial capability.

"Most people from school have left town now, for college or for work. Karen is living down in Castlebar with her sister, Connell hasn't seen her since the Leaving Cert. Rob and Eric are both studying Business in Galway and never seem to be in town." (Rooney, 2018, p. 88)

The same opportunity to continue studies at higher education institutions still leads to differences in social class. Dublin serves as one of the settings that Rooney uses to explain this. Although Dublin is the center of government, business, and education, the opportunities available are colored by inequality. Through Connell, Rooney shows that the choice of a luxurious lifestyle and even the way of speaking still dominates the majority of students there.

"This is what it's like in Dublin. All of Connell's classmates have identical accents and carry the same size MacBook under their arms. In seminars, they express their opinions passionately and conduct impromptu debates." (Rooney, 2018, p. 84)

Besides illustrating human rights violations befalling Irish people, Rooney also describes the atrocities and human rights violations that occur in situations of conflict or war, such as oppression, genocide, or slavery. For example, on page 256, Rooney writes about how Marianne and Connell attend a protest against the war in Gaza and reflects their will to help create peace and be useful for others, especially for innocent ones, as an opposition to what she did in the past, helping a few or nobody. The scene resonates with other crime stories (McGuire, 2016) and terrorism and freedom fighters in Irish literature (Pelaschiar, 2009). Through Marianne and other protesters, Rooney describes that conflict affects human rights. By raising the issue of Israel and the Middle East, Rooney emphasizes that they care about the state of the world as if they are part of those fighting for the rights of marginalized people.

Then, Rooney raises the issue of violence against women, children, or other groups based on gender or sexual orientation, as well as their struggle for equal rights. One example of this gender-based violence happens between Marianne and Jamie, her boyfriend. This vital issue depicts how violence against women occurs within society. For instance, in a scene where Marianne quietly asks Jamie to put his glass down, Jamie even does it roughly, as Rooney writes, "He drops the glass on the floor and it shatters. Marianne

screams, a real scream from her throat, and launches her body at Jamie, drawing her right arm behind her as if to strike him (p. 205)." Another scene also illustrates similar violence in which Marianne's brother hits her on her nose until she bleeds, "I think my nose is broken ..." (p. 280). Connell looks at "her T-shirt, her skirt and part of her left wrist are stained with blood" (p. 280).

Finally, Rooney's *Normal People* describes the struggle of individuals or groups to maintain their identity, language, traditions, and culture amidst the pressures of assimilation or oppression. The novel attempts to preserve the cultural identity of a particular region as its hallmark. In this way, the tension between traditional and modern cultures can be reconciled. Rooney writes:

"People in Dublin often mention the West of Ireland in this strange tone of voice, as if it's a foreign country, but one they consider themselves very knowledgeable about. In the Workmans the other night, Connell told a girl he was from Sligo and she made a funny face and said: Yeah, you look like it." (Rooney, 2018, p. 86)

Rooney laughs at the attitude of a group of people who feel superior and better than others. People in Dublin feel more connected to the area in the West. They think that people from the outskirts will never go to other countries. Only a Dubliner like Peggy can do it, and non-city dwellers will not have the chance to do so. Peggy says, "You've been to Berlin?" she says. I didn't think they let people from Connacht travel that far. They must have given you time off from the farm, says Peggy. Quite, says Marianne" (p. 161). What Rooney describes certainly refers to what has happened in Ireland, as recorded in Irish literature about all traumatic stories in Irish literature (McCarthy-Curtis, 2015).

### 4.3 Mental Health

Rooney pays attention to the influence of capitalism on the mental health of children, women, and gender issues. The practice of capitalism causes people to come up with different kinds of desires, including bizarre and changing ones. These desires reflect their inability to control their emotion, resulting in fantasizing and acting out desires beyond common sense. Through young characters, Rooney represents how young people in Ireland live in social environments, households, and schools. In addition to the similar figures being recorded by Fogarty (2015), who concentrates on children, and Naylor (2024) on women's health in Irish literature, Rooney depicts such disturbances in some issues, including mental disorders, social stigma towards mental health, struggle for recovery, isolation and loneliness, self-perception and mental health, as well as the impact of social environment and changing preferences.

First, Rooney describes the experiences of characters who suffer from mental disorders, such as depression, anxiety, PTSD, or schizophrenia, as well as the impact on their lives. She illustrates things that Mikowski (2010) calls gender issues, which can occur in either men or women. Wrapped by the issue of love, Connell feels infatuated with Marianne and is so willing to express his love to her. Rooney writes, "He kept thinking of himself saying to Marianne in bed: I love you. It was terrifying, like watching himself committing a terrible crime on CCTV" (p. 68). This scene shows Connell's anxiety about his desire being negated by Marianne. Besides, the anxiety about others, including romantic partners, is also highlighted in *Normal People*, particularly the anxiety women have towards men. Watching her mother hit by her father, Marianne is worried about Connell's wish to hit

her (p. 56), where violence has traumatized her, remembering her father hitting her mother and herself at home.

Next, *Normal People* explores how social stigma affects individuals with mental disorders to cope with bizarre desires, as well as how they face discrimination or rejection from society. This work emphasizes that the social stigma against those with mental health issues will color the behavior of those around them towards those who suffer from it. Through the eyes of Connell, Rooney depicts the suffering Marianne has gone through in her school years when other students get rid of her, and she has to enjoy herself without friends. Although she performs well at school, she is alone and only absorbed in her routines, surrounded by people's likes and dislikes. Her saddening family background, having a mother who does not attend to her and her father and brother who do not like her and sometimes hit her, has caused her to have "a mental illness now or something" (p.13). Yet, she can make Connell like and feel scared of her, "It's true she is the smartest person in school. He dreads being left alone with her like this, but he also finds himself fantasizing about things he could say to impress her." (p. 13). Rooney explores how the character must confront an environment she dislikes. This behavior is a result of childhood trauma from the loss of her father. Rooney suggests that mental health is not only psychological but even more concerning with drug use, as she puts it in the character Connell (p. 268).

Then, Rooney describes any efforts made by the characters, including Connell, to recover from mental disorders. They must devise new ways of life to escape their problems. This act of changing preferences is necessary to cope with their problems and find solutions. They must face challenges to get out and seek support from others. She mentions some instances, as can be seen in the following quotes.

"At this point in the session Yvonne starts to hand him worksheets, illustrated with large cartoon arrows pointing to various text boxes. He takes them and pretends that he's intending to fill them out later. She also hands him some photocopied pages about dealing with anxiety, which he pretends he will read. She prints a note for him to take to the college health service advising them about his depression, and he says he'll come back for another session in two weeks. Then he leaves the office." (Rooney, 2018, pp 245-246)

For Rooney, capitalism is not only seen as a state ideology that harms its citizens, but he implicitly portrays how social isolation or loneliness affects the mental health of society. Through the characters in this novel, Rooney indicates capitalism with the characters, including its impact on their behavior and emotions. Rooney portrays social isolation or loneliness as a source of mental disturbance in society, particularly among the younger generation. Through the characters of high school graduates, this novel illustrates the impact of social isolation due to family, environment, and society on their disturbed mental health. Through personal effort and environmental support, they managed to overcome psychological issues and become strong and successful individuals. For example, the novel illustrates Connell, who seeks mental release. He talks about how he is accepted and denied by different communities. In high school, he had a lot of friends but felt isolated, and many people liked him. But he does not feel many people like him in the new place. He experiences what his dead friend felt when they were still together. They make friends not because of their commonness but because of their differences (p. 244).

Next, Rooney highlights how a character's self-perception affects their mental health, including self-esteem, body image, or self-identity (Dewi et al., 2024). She observes that self-perception is related to mental health. Through Marianne, Rooney illustrates how this

character is socially isolated, living in a family that does not socialize, attending school without friends, and existing in society as an individual. She can only have one friend and, at the same time, a secret lover. Marianne claims that she does not know what is wrong with her, and she says, "I don't know why I can't be like normal people. I don't know why I can't make people love me" (p. 208). She claims the situation is a congenital disability. Then, she cannot control her behavior and actions in her environment. Rooney shows that social, family, and personal life can give rise to internal conflicts in young people. She compellingly illustrates this through the character Connell. He begins to live as an individual who can confront issues and make peace with himself.

"Lately, he's consumed by a sense that he is, in fact, two separate people, and soon he will have to choose which person to be on a full-time basis and leave the other person behind. He has a life in Carricklea, he has friends. If he went to college in Galway he could stay with the same social group, really, and live the life he has always planned on, getting a good degree, having a nice girlfriend. People would say he had done well for himself. On the other hand, he could go to Trinity like Marianne. Life would be different then. He would start going to dinner parties and having conversations about the Greek bailout. He could fuck some weird-looking girls who turn out to be bisexual. I've read *The Golden Notebook*, he could tell them. It's true, he has read it. After that he would never come back to Carricklea, he would go somewhere else, London, or Barcelona. People would not necessarily think he had done well; some people might think he had gone very bad, while others would forget about him entirely. What would Lorraine think? She would want him to be happy, and not care what others said. But the old Connell, the one all his friends know: that person would be dead in a way, or worse, buried alive, and screaming under the earth." (Rooney, 2018, pp. 37-38)

*Normal People* also depicts how social environments, such as family, friends, or society, influence the characters' mental health positively and negatively. Several things can be noted regarding the impact of the social environment on the characters' mental health. How does the social environment of a character influence their mental health? The novel portrays a toxic element in the social relationships of characters, as seen in the following quote.

"Marianne is a masochist and Connell is simply too nice of a guy to hit a woman. This, after all, is the literal level on which the incident took place. She asked him to hit her, and when he said he didn't want to, she wanted to stop having sex." (Rooney, 2018, p. 277).

*Normal People* depicts a woman who chooses to be hurt during sex with her partner. Such representations can serve as a reference in using fiction to address mental health (Peterkin & Grewal, 2018).

## 5. DISCUSSION

This study improves our understanding of the role of literature, particularly fiction, in representing human issues, especially by examining the novel *Normal People* by Sally Rooney. By answering how the complex themes of capitalism, human rights, and mental health are intertwined in this work, the results show that the narrative is capable of exposing the interplay between the three issues, particularly when referring to the aspect of capitalism as suggested by Althusser (2016), human rights by the UDHR, and mental health by Chappell et al. (2024).

The main important finding is that the novel can be a good example of how fiction portrays the impact of capitalism on people, especially seen from an adolescent's perspective. *Normal People* is one of the many rare examples of stories about the effects of capitalism written by a young Irish woman writer. Although the work by this young female author is contemporary and popular, the significance of its appearance has colored the literary world and invited important recommendations from many groups domestically and internationally. Its importance is seen from its author's recognition to receive some awards and its acceptance by different media like film.

Furthermore, this study demonstrates that the fictional analysis of capitalism is significant not only because it depicts the problems of capitalism in Ireland but also because it indicates how capitalism affects people's rights. Notwithstanding one's differences from others, all people worldwide are entitled to the universal rights outlined in the United Nations UDHR. This study reveals the effects of capitalism on human rights, such as the right to live one's life, the right to education, and the right to employment, among the 30 universal human rights to which every person is entitled. These represented rights are in line with Sen's (2019) study findings on the insecurity of life and rights in relation to literature, race, and property rights (Powell, 2023), body exploitation (Dewi et al., 2024), and traumatic experiences (McCarthy-Curtis, 2015).

The representation of mental health among Irish youth is the subject of the study's third noteworthy discovery. The study demonstrates that the fictional depiction of Irish capitalism also impacts the nation's citizens' health. The novel responds to the three types of theories of well-being put forth by Chappell et al. (2024). The findings demonstrate that hedonism is not always satisfied when wants in human lives cannot objectify themselves. The analysis shows that capitalism has influenced how well-being is portrayed in Ireland. Irish students' inability to satisfy their craving for money, wisdom, and love has prevented them from becoming hedonists. Their mental health suffers as a result of this failure. This is consistent with the findings of studies on mental health (Peterkin & Grewal, 2018), the mental health of youth (Fogarty, 2015), women's health (Naylor, 2024), gender difficulties in health (Mikoski, 2010), and the relationship between self-identity and health (Dewi et al., 2024).

The study's results also contribute to the global body of literature on fictional discourse on global capitalism. Debates on capitalism, human rights, and mental health point to a noteworthy trend in the field of fiction studies. This study emphasizes that fiction can serve as an example of a story that demonstrates capitalism's one-sided inability to construct a nation since it can impact its citizens' mental health and violate their rights. As a result, they are unable to find contentment. The novel demonstrates that implementing ISA and RSA, as theorized by Althusser (2016) in Ireland, was unsuccessful. The practice was unsuccessful in enabling the Irish people to enjoy their rights as modeled in UDHR and well-being as suggested by Chappell et al. (2024).

In conclusion, *Normal People* demonstrates that Ireland's use of capitalism as the state ideology is unsuccessful because of its detrimental effects on the rights and mental health of its citizens. It indicates that in a nation that embraces capitalism, there will inevitably be a relationship between capitalism, human rights, and mental health. According to the novel, capitalism in Ireland is harmful to its citizens.

## 6. CONCLUSION

Fiction serves as a powerful tool to understand and educate people about human rights and the mental health challenges related to capitalism and its impacts. Addressing these issues requires a multifaceted approach that includes economic, legal, and cultural considerations. *Normal People* by Sally Rooney suggests that capitalism, human rights, and mental health are deeply interconnected. Capitalism's incompatibility with human needs can exacerbate mental health issues, while human rights violations further compound these problems. This article provides a broader horizon for readers regarding the representation of capitalism and its impacts on people's rights and mental health in modern literature, especially Irish literature. Sally Rooney's *Normal People* suggests that capitalism is impactful on humans and destructive to human rights and mental health. The novel shows that rather than uniting and making Irish people closer, capitalism caused people to be divided into the upper and the lower classes. This division creates issues related to human rights violations and mental health problems.

Despite its theoretical and methodological limitations, this research provides insights into the representation of issues such as capitalism, human rights, and mental health in modern literature worldwide, particularly in Irish literature. Practically, this research enhances understanding of social issues like capitalism, human rights, and mental health in Ireland and how literature voices criticism of social conditions in society. Theoretically, this research provides readers with a perspective on the issue of capitalist ideology from ideological, political, and psychological viewpoints. Furthermore, other researchers could explore the novel by employing different literary lenses, such as postcolonial, feminist, or postmodern perspectives, as well as other scopes, such as cultural institutions and environmental systems.

### Acknowledgment

Not applicable

### Availability of Data and Materials

Not applicable

### Competing Interests

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

### Funding

This work was supported by the Direktorat Riset, Teknologi dan Pengabdian kepada Masyarakat, Direktorat Jenderal Pendidikan Tinggi, Riset dan Teknologi Kementerian Pendidikan, Kebudayaan, Riset dan Teknologi, Republik Indonesia, under Grant No 041/E5/PG.02.00.PL/2024.

### Authors' Contribution

Ferdinal worked on the project and the main conceptual ideas and wrote the manuscript. Sudarmoko worked on the project and the main conceptual ideas. Chintya Dewi collected and analyzed the data. Oktavianus worked on the conceptual ideas and proofread the manuscript.

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