

The Black Race as an Infirm Identity in Leila Mottley's *Night crawling*

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Abstract

This paper examines the Black Race as an Infirm Identity in Leila Mottley's *Nightcrawling*. Through a qualitative content analysis, the study explores the experiences of the protagonist Kiara Johnson as she confronts racial discrimination and social injustice. By applying Alfred Adler's Individual Psychology theoretical framework, the article analyses the representations of systemic racism within the text. The paper highlights how Black identity is criminalised and devalued and how contemporary African American literature serves as a tool for resistance, amplifying marginalised voices and advocating for radical change. The findings contribute to ongoing discussions about racial injustice and the African American experience, underscoring the urgent need for policy changes and social reforms to protect Black lives.

Keywords: African American, Race, Infirmary, Identity, Discrimination

Introduction

Infirmary is a powerful tool to explore the multifaceted nature of human limitations, both physical and psychological. Characters with infirmities often demonstrate extraordinary resilience and adaptability in overcoming obstacles. Their struggles can inspire readers and show that limitations do not define a person's worth or potential. Infirmary can reveal more profound layers of a character's personality, motivations and values. They can expose vulnerabilities and strengths used as symbols to represent broader themes, such as the fragility of human existence, the power of the human spirit

or the consequence of societal prejudice. Characters with infirmities can face unique moral dilemmas that challenge societal norms and expectations. Their

experiences can raise questions about justice, compassion and the nature of race as the minority race of the Black Community or African/Caribbean Americans who have long suffered discrimination due to their racial identity. Most African American literature narrate the bitter experiences of slavery and its aftermath, racism, struggle for freedom and equality, struggle for civil rights and racial equality. The Slave Trade was the capture, forcible transport and sale of Africans to Europeans for lifelong bondage in the Americas, lasting from the 16th to 19th centuries.

Class in this study is the level of social group the minority race has found itself, being the only disadvantaged people and meant to live only in the ghetto. They find themselves doing inferior jobs as messengers, drivers, cleaners, bartenders, etc. Race is

intertwined in this case with Blacks, which form the central concern of the text under study that results in the issue of class difference between minority and superior races. The blackness that constitutes the race in the Blacks has become what this study termed as "disease", "disability" or "infirmity".

This article examines the Black race as an infirmed identity in Leila Mottley's *Night crawling* (2022). The text explores the experiences of African Americans in the present-day United States of America due to race and all other challenges African Americans face.

The concept of infirmity is subjective as it has diverse interpretations. From the medical angle, infirmity is viewed as a "disease", "foible", or "illness" and "sickness. This is further expatiated as" Disease, Illness, Sickness, Health, Healing and Wholeness: Exploring Some Elusive Concepts" (Boyd, 2000, p.4). Boyd also posits his opinion on "disease" that:

...nowadays the word Infirmity is more commonly used without a hyphen to refer to a "disorder of structure or function in an animal or plant of such a degree as to produce or threaten to produce detectable illness or disorder-or again, more narrowly, to "a definable variety of such a disorder, usually with specific signs or symptoms or affecting a specific location". That at least is how the New Shorter Oxford Dictionary defines it, adding as synonyms: "(an) illness", "(a) sickness" (Boyd, 2000)

From the sociological and political point of view, Kuuliala (2015) views infirmity as the creation of a given society and its norms, conceptions, and restrictive practices. While impairment is seen as a

biological or physical "fact," the degree of disability varies depending on society.

This is where this article draws its problem and concept from as it explores the issues of racial discrimination, which have been considered very sensitive in African American literature. However, where infirmity is used in this article, it is synonymous with the social construct, which is limitation or disability due to race but not a mere physical disease. The paper uses the qualitative research method, emphasising that it is designed to explore the human elements of a given topic. Using Alfred Adler's psychology theory, the paper addresses social feeling, which refers to the person's innate sense of kinship with all of humanity and that is tied to evolved practices in the text.

Theoretical Framework

This article uses the theory of Individual Psychology of Alfred Adler as an offshoot of psychoanalysis because in every situation of critical thoughts comes a condition of "otherness". Psychoanalysis as a theory is at the core of uncovering human thoughts and exposing the complexities of the human mind, thought, identity, and social awareness that shape behavioural patterns. Alfred called his approach *Individual Psychology* because it expressed his belief that every human personality is unique and indivisible (Ewen, 1988). His emphasis on the individual does not preclude the social. The social element is an "all-important" factor since it is only in a social context that an individual becomes an individual. Each person enters life with their own unique set of potentialities and possibilities for development, and their actions are a means of determining these differences:

The influences of both heredity and environment become the child's possession, and he uses them to find his development path. However, neither the path nor the movement can be considered or adopted without a direction or goal. The Goals of the human soul are conquest, perfection, security, and superiority. (Adler, 1938, p.15)

Adler believes that a person's earliest memories give clues to the person's present and future identity Ewen (1988). Whether accurate or not, memories of infancy and childhood provide clues regarding one's style of life since they influence self-selected goals. The lack of concern with the accuracy of memories was due to Adler's belief that it was how the person remembered childhood, not the actual childhood. It reflects the person's perspective on and interpretation of that life. According to Adler, "The individual's interpretation of life is not a trivial matter, for it is the plumb-line of his thinking, feeling, and acting" (1938, p. 32). The same situations and the same experiences, the same life problems, affect each person differently. To come to grips with this, the person's style of life (the unique mode of adjustment that characterises an individual) has to be identified.

This article uses this theory because it centres on belonging, overcoming feelings of inferiority, and striving for achievement. Many African American writers grapple with these issues due to the social and racial realities they face. Therefore, individual psychology theory is a possible means of understanding infirmity, as it is viewed through alienation, isolation, marginalisation, oppression, lack of opportunity, and other prejudices.

Racism as Infirmary in *Nightcrawling*

Nightcrawling (2022), set in East Oakland, is the story of Kiara Johnson, a Black 17-year-old in Oakland, California. She and her older brother, Marcus, barely bring enough money to pay the rent on their apartment. Their father's death and their mother's incarceration have left them to fend for themselves.

Kiara takes it upon herself to care for Trevor, the nine-year-old boy who lives next door, whose mother has a substance-use disorder and is often absent. She spends her days walking from business to business in search of employment, to no avail. She stops at a gentleman's club where a former girlfriend of Marcus', Lacy, bartends. The club will not hire Kiara because she is a minor, but Lacy gives Kiara free drinks. Before long, she is intoxicated, and as she leaves the club, she is propositioned by a man who had been sitting near her at the bar. He takes her to a rooftop, and they have sex; then the man gives her \$200. Stunned at how quickly she was able to earn a significant sum of money, Kiara decides to pursue sex work but is eventually caught by the police. The officers threaten to arrest her but offers her a deal that could avoid legal repercussions if she agrees to attend "parties" where she would be paid to allow officers to have sex with her. Feeling she has no choice, she agrees. In the months that follow, she makes money from these "parties" to pay rent and to feed and care for Trevor, but she grows increasingly traumatised by the abuse she suffers. She learns from Cole's girlfriend, Shauna, that Marcus and Cole and their friends have been selling drugs.

On her 18th birthday, Kiara and Trevor bake a cake and plan a day of fun swimming and playing

basketball. Two police officers appear at the swimming pool and ask Kiara to accompany them to the police station for questions. The officer with whom Kiara spent the night has died by suicide and left a note revealing the details of the police sex ring, including Kiara's assumed name. Kiara does not learn these details, however, until after she is released and an undercover police officer, Sandra, approaches her in secret, explaining that she is going to make details of the sex-trafficking parties public. She asks Kiara if she wants her to reveal her name, but Kiara orders her not to.

When news of the scandal breaks, Kiara's name is not included, although she grows increasingly paranoid and fearful of her safety. Things become worse when Marcus and Cole are arrested for drug possession. Kiara barter with Sandra, who agrees to provide Kiara with Uncle Ty's contact information if Kiara will speak with an attorney. Uncle Ty arrives from Los Angeles and visits Marcus in jail but is unwilling to provide much help. She eventually contacts Marsha (the attorney Sandra instructs her to speak to). Marsha prepares Kiara for an impending grand jury, which will determine whether there is enough evidence for police officers to be indicted on charges of sex trafficking. Kiara is adamant that Marsha must help Marcus get released from jail, and Marsha agrees to see what might be done. Child Protective Services takes Trevor as the landlord and learns that Trevor's mother is no longer present to care for him.

The grand jury trial begins, and Kiara testifies. The judge grills Kiara, twisting the facts to suggest that Kiara voluntarily participated in sex parties. Kiara insists that she was forced. After her testimony, some days later, Marsha phones to tell Kiara that the grand

jury has ruled against indicting the police officers. The novel ends when Trevor unexpectedly returns, sneaking from foster care to retrieve his basketball. Though Kiara knows he must return to Foster care, the two take one last swim together, relishing each other's company.

Leila Mottley's *Nightcrawling* (2022) critiques the failures of the justice system to protect victims of sexual abuse and hold perpetrators accountable. The novel explores the complexities of seeking justice, highlighting the challenges faced by survivors and the importance of perseverance. The novel suggests that storytelling can be a form of justice, allowing victims to reclaim their narratives and challenge societal silence. Mottley presents the realities and issues of the 21st century that lay bare the racial discrimination that results from such limiting dispositions and constructs. It examines the ordeals of young black Americans, especially girls, in the 21st century. Mottley, though a young girl growing up, internalises the ordeals of the black people in America and is very much aware of the economic injustice in the country where the whites will always have the upper hand and the blacks down there.

Infirmity has functioned historically to justify inequality not just for disabled people but also for minority groups and races Stephen (2017). Thus, being a black person or belonging to the black race is almost equivalent to being infirm. *Nightcrawling* expresses how society attempts to confine the blacks and the minority race to a perpetual state of dependency. This is seen in the life of Kiara and her family. As Kiara would say about her mother, "Mama blamed the prison for Daddy's death, which meant she blamed the people who made it possible for

Daddy to have ended up there in the first place meant she blamed the streets”(NC, p. 5). She also said, “There are many ways to walk up the streets, but none will make you bulletproof...” (NC, p. 82). The realisation of the expression above by Kiara is a disposition of her dependence on society, which enslaves the minority race and gags them all. Even in the face of subjugation, their voices are silent and muted. It wasn't clear as to what Kiara's father did and was imprisoned; the story only reveals he was home with his kids and wife when some Policemen ‘sauntered’ into his home and arrested him alongside some of his friends. Kiara's father stayed in prison for a long time, which affected his health. They had no one to fight for them, as no one cared. Their mother became depressed and more devastated when their father passed away. She became a shadow of herself and attempted to murder their little sister, Soraya. The mother watched as the little child drowned in the pool in their home, refusing to save the child; the same day, she (the mother) attempted to commit suicide. The Police came in and arrested her in regards to Soraya's death. No one cared to observe the sorrows she was passing through. She was left without a voice.

Literature gives special attention to “voice”, a great metaphor that symbolises power, privilege and authority, and to be without it in American society is to be “dumb”, and to speak is to do so with severe limitation. Kiara says with pain as she explains, “... I think we're all out here unlearning the sentiment, scraping our knees and asking strangers to patch us back up...”(NC, p. 14). This predicament of Kiara is a significant form of “infirmity” that the minority race in America is exposed to. A dumb is said to be suffering from infirmity due to his inability to speak, whose silence is inevitable. The minority race is made

dumb by the American society that is driven by the whites. Stephen (2017) and Ladele (2016) call this “a masculine ethos” better put under this study the “white supremacist”. When the cops took Kiara away, she could say nothing; she could speak but became dumb. Being unable to speak despite having a voice is also seen in how Kiara insisted that her mother talk and say what happened to her younger sister. She tells her mother, “Mama, I knew coming here wasn't a good idea, but you are going to ask me to get you out of this place when you can't even say Soraya's name? You don't never change? Here we are, mama, asking me to write myself dry of everything I got while she sits perfectly full” (NC, p. 18).

Kiara expected a commendation or a pat on the back for her daily struggles to keep her family together and her daily efforts. However, her mother thinks otherwise; she believes that the only way to be free is when one speaks up. Infirmity is the abrogation of ability, good health and strength. Kiara's efforts affirm Adler's theory of individual psychology, which, according to Adler, humans are motivated more by their future expectations than by past experiences (Adler in Hall & Lindzey, 1978). All the partial and realistic goals a person undertakes are always on that line, in that direction and towards that goal because that is the purpose that determines one's thoughts, feelings, desires and actions. A normal person can free himself from the effects of these fictions and face reality when necessity is needed, something that neurotics cannot do.

This scenario explains the injustice and decadence of the society Kiara finds herself in; she, a minor, was forced to cater for another minor (Trevor). She continued walking the streets at night until she got

involved with police officers. Something striking happened on her first encounter with the police; they were on patrol on a fateful night when they caught Kiara and a man in a secluded place in an uncompromising position; they let the man go (he was a white man), and took Kiara in. This shows how black people are defenceless and helpless even with the authorities. Consequently, Kiara became a call girl for many police officers. They used her as they wished, passing her from one cop to another. She never bargained with them for payment as they handed her whatever they deemed fit. Her involvement with the policemen made her more vulnerable and afraid of life than ever.

It is within the structure of this oppressive society that Kiara and the minority are deprived of the right to be seen or heard to even think of complaining. In such a society, the minority race is sentenced to a life of silence, just as Kiara decides to “hibernate” for good. This aligns with the theory of Individual Psychology, which states that “man is a conscious being; he is usually aware of the reasons for his behaviour. Moreover, he is a self-conscious individual who can plan and guide his actions with full awareness of his meaning for his realisation”. (Adler, 1938, p.12). Kiara’s infirmity in this context can be tied to her racial status and her class as a minority. This position affirms the position of Adler (1923), which, according to him, is that man is aware of his inferiority and the goal he is striving for. This goal has made Kiara resort to the streets as the only way to meet ends needs. She says, “The cops believe they are invincible. They want me only to show themselves that they can have me and that there will be no consequences to putting a gun to my head or taking me. They want me to feel small so they can feel big, and in this moment, they

have succeeded” (NC, p. 44). Again, she says, “... stopped telling myself it’s just sex, just skin because it has become so much more than that; there is the sex, and then there is the terror, the marble white of their eyes” (NC, p. 45). Kiara is in a hopeless state; she is just a minor, a young girl, and the policemen (oppressors) see her as property they can own at any time. She said they cared more about their badges than her, and she was nothing more than a reward in their game. They used her as a reward in their gambling game.

On the day of the testimony, Kiara arrived in court full of hope. This hearing was supposed to be a pathway to freedom for herself and her brother. She had high expectations and firmly believed in the law to protect her. She walked boldly into the courtroom, and when it was her time, she genuinely and sincerely answered every question the witty defence counsel threw at her. Even when she sensed the lawyer being biased and trying to confuse her, she refused to flinch. Kiara was sure everything went perfectly in the courtroom, but somehow, everything got twisted to her disadvantage. They knew that Kiara’s father had been to prison, her mother, and now her brother; they made it look like Kiara was from a family of ‘convicts’ and drug addicts, wholly ignoring the fact that both Kiara and her family were only victims of a failed society, trying to survive.

Infirmity is a means of examining discrimination, limitations, and biases resulting from identity differences. Adopting the name “Kiara Holt” makes her forget the suffering related to her skin colour; she says, “I didn’t want to give strangers my real name” “And why not?” the lawyer asked, “it’s dangerous”, she answered, (NC. p. 119). Kiara also feels herself

different from other white women, "Nobody stops a woman who looks like she runs the place. Don't matter that she don't got a badge, that she's got this black girl in ripped jeans following her. Most white women default to thinking they own every room they walk into, and Marsha is no different" (NC, p, 100). Kiara saying most white women, by default, think they own every room they walk into shows a disparity between black women and white women; Marsha walks into a building without any means of identification. She walks into the offices with an air of authority, and no one questions her. On the other hand, Kiara is just a black girl with ripped jeans following Marsha. Her ticket to entering the building is because she is right behind Marsha; had she been alone, she would not have dared enter the building. This hints at the different racial and social issues connected to the predicament of being black in an environment hostile to blacks.

I don't know what that entails, but I've seen enough news to know the only time a grand jury ever comes up, it's because some blue-suit shot a black man and the government wanted to pretend they gave a shit. It never ended in nothing but the black boy on the news, hood up, and some report about how he smoked some flower in seventh grade. I've done so much worse. (NC. p. 95).

Kiara's statement offers a glimpse into the existential crisis faced by Black individuals.

Kiara strives to have a better life even after changing her name; she wishes to change her identity because she thinks 'it's dangerous' to have a change of identity, much to the convenience of freedom and resolve to make meaning out of her life. The two

essential benefits primarily determined by a given society's socio-cultural dynamism and/or disposition are privilege and oppression. These benefits are often assigned based on identity. Thus, good health, strength and infirmity usually matter whether one suffers oppression or enjoys privilege. Kiara, who is the main character, suffers a deal of oppression. The white supremacist society informs her suffering. This society impacts Kiara in that it is not in the place of a minority race of blacks to demand justice even when they are oppressed or limited from participating in nation-building.

Kiara laments,

...I'm giving up the streets, giving up so much of what has become my world, at least for now. I thought it would feel like a celebration, and it does, but it also feels like grieving, still trying to make sense of the months and the men and what I have given up in the name of feeling like I am in control... (NC, p. 96).

This profound reality of her experience is informed by the constant oppression she has faced at every stage of her life. Thus, being a minority race (black) makes one infirmed, disabled or deformed by the expectation of the American society that places the minority ethnic groups at the receiving end of their oppression. Kiara's experience with the Police is an example of how racial identity in a racist society can constitute infirmity.

In the novel, Kiara's statement, "I don't remember the last time a white man voluntarily talked, let alone followed me out onto the street..." (p. 18), as well as the association of the colour "the marble white of

their eyes”, referring to the policemen. This means that white men do not voluntarily converse with black people, and it’s evident that the white man following Kiara at that time of the night is up to no good. These people only looked for ways and opportunities to take advantage of black people and, in the end, tried to make them look hostile. This can be seen during Kiara’s testimony when the lawyer tried to prompt that Kiara is from a family of “convicts”, insinuating an uneasy presence of unspoken, yet subtly acknowledged, potential for threat and violence. This provides us with diametrically opposite views connected to cultural perceptions regarding blacks in the racially segregated American milieu, thereby criminalising the Negroes in every given opportunity. For instance, the conversation between Kiara and the Lawyer on the day of her testimony:

“And where is your brother...?”

“...He’s in Santa Rita...”

“The Jail...?”

“Yes”

“What is he there for?”

“...Drugs”

“...Is that why you were involved in prostitution?”

“What you talking about...?”

“Drugs... did you enter prostitution to pay for drugs?”

“No, I ain’t done no drugs” (NC. p. 120)

The notion that all blacks must be involved in drugs in one way or another and that they are a threat to society is what informed the reaction of the lawyer towards Kiara that all blacks are involved in one criminality or another. Kiara explains thus in her subconscious, “He already has an idea, starts down the path of asking me about Marcus, Mama, and Daddy. Says something about familial histories of erratic behaviour or some shit, and this is what Marsha told me it might be, but I still want to crawl out of my skin...” (NC, p. 120). In the end, Kiara does not get the justice she deserves. Again, the justice system failed the helpless and defenceless. She only got an apology from the lawyer fighting her case (Marsha). This means that her brother will remain in jail. She could not cry anymore; she was more than devastated, knowing that those oppressors (the police officers) were walking as if nothing had been done to them. Even the compensation that was promised her was not given. Life became ‘a dark hole’. She is now more vulnerable and completely alone.

Conclusion

NightCrawling offers a stark portrayal of systemic racism, exploring how racial biases and stereotypes can contribute to the marginalisation and exploitation of Black individuals. The emphasis on economic injustice, identity and difference creates a system that deliberately assigns privileges to some and discrimination/oppression to “others” as a way of sustaining dominance. Through Kiara’s voice, who walks through the journey of her ordeals, we encounter individuals who are incapacitated by poverty and racial discrimination within the American society.

Finally, this article shows that beyond the representation of physically impaired characters, the concept of infirmity in African American literature extends to social prejudices that affect the quality of life. Therefore, the figurative use of infirmity brings to bare individual and collective experiences of limitation/discrimination in American society, which in this case is seen in race, class, and ethnicity. The employment of infirmity as a concept helps interrogate the social injustice, discrimination, limitation, and marginalisation that characterise the dualities that define human life in the text.

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