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## Exploring The Social Conflict In The Novel *Small Mercies* By Dennis Lehane

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**Abstract:** *This study explores the presence of social conflict in literature as a reflection of real-world societal tensions. Literature has long been intertwined with society, often serving as a mirror that reveals the complexities of human relationships and communal life. Among the various types of conflict depicted in literary works, social conflict stands out due to its close connection to the human condition. As inherently social beings, individuals naturally encounter friction within their communities, making social conflict an inevitable and meaningful theme. In this context, literature not only reflects but also encourages critical engagement with social issues. It serves as an educational tool, particularly in the classroom, by raising awareness of the types of conflict that may arise in real-life contexts. This research applies Louis Kriesberg's social conflict theory to analyze the novel *Small Mercies* by Dennis Lehane, offering a distinctive theoretical lens compared to prior studies. A qualitative method with narrative analysis was employed. Data were collected through documentation and analyzed using Creswell's framework. The findings reveal three primary causes of social conflict in the novel: rank disequilibrium, changes in attainments and expectations, and power inequality. This study contributes to a deeper understanding of how literature portrays and critiques social dynamics.*

**Keywords:** *Conflict, Social Conflict, Novel*

### INTRODUCTION

Literary works reflect an individual's inner thoughts, conveyed through a perspective shaped by societal conditions and articulated in refined language (Suri et al., 2022). Literature has long served as a medium for exploring human life, offering deep insight into real world experiences. External literary texts are often examined comprehensively to uncover underlying phenomena or conflicts that demand thoughtful interpretation. Conflict is an inherent aspect of human existence, frequently manifesting in diverse forms and situations. It is understood as a dynamic process that arises from incompatibility, disagreement, or inconsistency within or between individuals and social groups (Rahim, 2017). There are three primary types of conflict: internal conflict, which occurs within an individual, often involving a struggle between personal desires and



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responsibilities; interpersonal conflict, which arises between individuals or between an individual and society; and external conflict involving the individual's interaction with nature (Kenney, P, William, 1966). Since this research focuses on the discussion of social conflict, it is essential to emphasize the close relationship between literature and society. Literature often serves as a mirror that reflects societal realities. Social conflict is a common phenomenon that emerges when differences between individuals or groups cannot be reconciled (Angraeni & Nur, 2023). It is emphasized more than other types of conflict due to its strong connection to the human experience within social contexts. As inherently social beings, humans naturally encounter social conflict as a fundamental aspect of living in a community. The study of social conflict offers valuable insights into human interaction and social behaviour within a community. It highlights the importance of understanding sociological dimensions in educational contexts, particularly in enhancing students' ability to interpret, communicate, and navigate real-life social dynamics (Hani, 2019). By examining social conflict, learners are encouraged to develop critical awareness of societal structures and the challenges that arise from human differences.

A novel is a fictional narrative developed from human imagination. It is typically written in prose form, extends to book length, and presents characters and events with elements of realism (Saud et al., 2022). Novels are not merely written for entertainment or reading pleasure. Instead, they provide rich material for analysis across various themes such as morality, feminism, inequality, and social conflict (Andriana & Rohmah, 2019). Through a broader narrative structure, novels allow for deeper character development and more elaborate storytelling, providing readers and scholars alike with a fuller and more meaningful literary experience. In this research, the researcher analyzes social conflict using Dennis Lehane's novel *Small Mercies* as the primary medium.

Several studies have been formed before such as (Rezkiyany et al., 2021) conducted a study focusing on the structural aspects of social conflict, offering a theoretical perspective on how conflicts are constructed within narrative frameworks. Another research conducted by (Daffa & Suryaningtyas, 2022) investigated social conflict by focusing on the two main characters in a film,



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analyzing how their interpersonal struggles reflect underlying social issues. Building on these studies, the present research provides a more in-depth analysis of the underlying causes of social conflict experienced by all characters within the narrative, employing a distinct theoretical framework that differs from those used in prior research.

The current research still has several limitations, particularly in its reliance on conventional theories and commonly analyzed texts. To address these gaps, this study adopts a relatively new and rarely used theoretical framework using Louis Kreisberg's theory, analyzes a recently published literary works, and applies a distinct analytical approach. These methodological choices enable the discovery of alternative perspectives and yield findings that differ from previous studies, thereby contributing new insights to the study of social conflict in narrative works.

## METHOD

This research employs a qualitative approach and utilizes narrative analysis, grounded in interdisciplinary frameworks, particularly within literary studies that examine human experiences (Ary et al., 2010). The data for this study were sourced from Dennis Lehane's novel *Small Mercies*, comprising utterances, dialogues, and sentences that illustrate the causes of social conflict. The data collection involved documentation, beginning with a thorough reading of the novel, followed by annotating relevant passages, categorizing and classifying the data according to the theoretical framework, and subsequently interpreting and analyzing the findings. The data analysis followed (Creswell, 2013) framework. The process began with organizing the previously collected data, followed by the development of codes for each data segment. Subsequently, these codes were described to highlight the causes of social conflict, facilitating the analytical process. A table was employed to categorize the causes of social conflict, with checkmarks used to identify data points relevant to each category. After coding, the data were interpreted to extract meanings aligned with the established theoretical framework. This involved describing the data in preparation for a narrative discussion within the thesis, based on the conducted analysis.



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## RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The data findings discovered by the researcher are discussed in depth in this section. The analysis is based on the causes of social conflict depicted in the novel. According to Louis Kriesberg's theory (Kriesberg, 1973), the causes of social conflict found in this novel are divided into three categories: rank disequilibrium, changes in attainments and expectations, and power inequality.

No.	Causes of Social Conflict	Frequency
1.	Rank Disequilibrium	12
2.	Change in Attainments and Expectations	1
3.	Power Inequality	13
TOTAL		26

*Table 1. The Causes of Social Conflict*

### Social Conflict Concept

This type of conflict arises when individuals encounter challenges within their surrounding environment. An example of social conflict in narratives is the opposition between characters, often represented by the protagonist (hero) and the antagonist (villain) (Lubis & Suhendi, 2023). Social conflict is a societal phenomenon that typically arises when disparities between individuals or groups prove irreconcilable (Nizar et al., 2022). Social conflict refers to disputes, differences of opinion, or disagreements that arise among individuals or groups within society, stemming from underlying differences that elicit varied responses from the involved parties or institutions (Sihombing et al., 2022).

### Causes of Social Conflict

In this research, there are three causes of social conflict namely rank disequilibrium, change in attachment and expectations, also power inequality that encompasses the entire content of the



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novel.

## ***Rank Disequilibrium***

In rank disequilibrium, individuals in disadvantaged positions tend to endure increased hardship (Kriesberg, 1973). They struggle to achieve equal conditions with others. The longer people remain in unfavorable circumstances, the more they suffer oppression from those in higher social classes. Below is the discussion of each causes.

**The power goes out sometime before dawn, and everyone at commonwealth wakes to sweater.**

The sentence *“the power goes out sometime before dawn, and everyone at Commonwealth wakes to sweater”* reflects social stratification that pressures the lower class to endure unequal conditions. Access to electricity is a vital societal resource, and those in power often hold the authority to control such resources. This imbalance allows them to impose their rules, leaving the lower class with limited choice but to comply. Such inequality represents a form of social conflict rooted in rank disequilibrium.

**I have a job.” “Part-time don’t count, honey. Part-time don’t make the rent”.**

The dialogue *“I have a job.” “Part-time don’t count, honey. Part-time don’t make the rent”* illustrates a group's dissatisfaction with their employment status. This reflects a societal environment such as that in the Commonwealth where financial status is highly valued, leading individuals in lower occupational ranks to feel marginalized and undervalued. Such dynamics exemplify how rank disequilibrium manifests within social structures.

**I’m gonna go to the spearchucker school looking for poorer than them? Her eyes are well, and she runs the towel violently**

The sentence *“I’m gonna go to the spearchucker school looking for poorer than them?”* reflects a sarcastic response to difficult living conditions. Experiencing poverty and discrimination from the wealthy creates a sense of frustration. Although education is accessible, the circumstances lead to dissatisfaction. Social fear and intimidation caused by class stratification contribute to social conflict, illustrating the impact of rank disequilibrium.



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**They aren't poor because they don't try hard. Don't work hard, aren't deserving of better things. They're poor because there's limited amount of good luck.**

The sentence *"They aren't poor because they don't try hard"* reflects a sense of frustration and dissatisfaction toward poverty. Living in a prosperous nation where wealth is celebrated often causes the lower class to feel intimidated and marginalized. This form of discrimination by the upper class represents a cause of social conflict rooted in rank disequilibrium.

**It is what all the young guys around here aspire to these days bag work for the Butler crew.**

The sentence *"It is what all the young guys around here aspire to these days bag work for the Butler crew."* Indicated that the power handle had the power to make the low power begging for things to them. This kind of behavior represented the rank disequilibrium.

**Nothing else fits. The people in power are telling her where she's going to send her only living child to school. Even if that endangers her child's education and even endangers her life.**

The sentence *"the people in power are telling her where she's going to send her only living child to school even if that endangers her child's education and even endangers her life"* highlights the dissatisfaction felt even by those in relatively privileged positions when their autonomy is undermined. Despite their higher social status, they remain subject to systemic pressures. This reflects how power and social stratification contribute to maintaining rigid social hierarchies, which can still generate conflict and dissatisfaction.

**Mary Pat works as a hospital aide at Meadow Lane Manor which is old folk's home. It's not a bad job once you make peace with the humiliation that comes with cleaning bedpans, giving daily baths to grown adults, and maintaining an air of servility.**

Such feelings arise from social injustices, particularly the discrimination based on social status that leads individuals or groups to feel intimidated. This is illustrated by the sentence *"It's not a bad job once you make peace with the humiliation that comes with cleaning bedpans, giving daily baths to grown adults, and maintaining an air of servility,"* which reflects the perceived degradation



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associated with serving others. This highlights a form of social conflict rooted in the lack of dignity and the constant pressure experienced by the lower class. In this context, rank disequilibrium serves as the underlying cause of the conflict.

**Filling the air with the cigarette smoke and pot smoke and every one of them embarrassment to their parents, who spent an ungodly amount of money to send them to the best school in the world; a school no poor person could ever get into.**

The dissatisfaction experienced by the lower classes stems from societal injustice. Acts of bullying, discrimination, and intimidation contribute to their sense of insecurity. The sentence “*the best school in the world; a school no poor person could ever get into*” signifies the unequal access to essential facilities, where the lower class is excluded from opportunities afforded to the privileged. This disparity leads to frustration and a sense of oppression, illustrating how rank disequilibrium functions as a key factor in the emergence of social conflict within society.

**She tells Bobby she dreamed of being a lawyer as a little girl, she even remembers dreaming of becoming a cop at one point, but when she reached college on a full academic scholarship, she still had to make ends meet for room and board.**

The sentence “*but when she reached college on a full academic scholarship, she still had to make ends meet for room and board*” highlights a social conflict rooted in rank disequilibrium. Despite receiving a scholarship, individuals may still experience financial hardships that prevent them from fully overcoming social disadvantages. The need to earn additional income to support basic living expenses underscores persistent inequalities and the limitations of economic aid in bridging class divides. Rank disequilibrium, as a source of social conflict, often remains subtle; however, minor tensions can escalate significantly in the absence of empathy and tolerance between social groups.

**They've been enslaving a whole generation of kids to the pills, to the mirror and the rolled-up bill, to the needle and the spoon.**

The sentence “*They've been enslaving a whole generation of kids to the pills, to the mirror and the rolled-up bill, to the needle and the spoon*” illustrates a cause of social conflict identified as rank disequilibrium. The ruling class exhibits discontent despite their wealth, seeking to control others



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and maximize their profits. This dynamic exemplifies how rank disequilibrium contributes to social conflict through behaviors that oppress those with less power.

**But how come it's always the poor who are expected to eat the food that's good for them no matter how it tastes? You don't see anyone in the rich neighbourhoods dealing with this.**

The sentence “*but how come it's always the poor who are expected to eat the food that's good for them no matter how it tastes? You don't see anyone in the rich neighbourhoods dealing with this*”.

Expresses feelings of frustration caused by poverty. Those experiencing rank disequilibrium often face limitations in accessing resources, opportunities, and social networks, which restricts their ability to improve their economic situation and move up the social ladder.

**No matter what we claim in public, in private we all know that the only law and the only god is money. If you have enough of it, you don't have to suffer consequences and you don't have to suffer for your ideals, you just foist them on someone else and feel good about the nobility of your intentions.**

The sentence “*If you have enough of it, you don't have to suffer consequences and you don't have to suffer for your ideals, you just foist them on someone else and feel good about the nobility of your intentions*” reflects the rank disequilibrium experienced by the lower class. Tired of discrimination by the powerful, they desire a life with equal opportunities and access to resources comparable to those of the ruling class.

## ***Changes in Attainments and Expectations***

Change in attainments and expectations refers to feelings of dissatisfaction or differing perceptions held by individuals (Kriesberg, 1973). This form of conflict can disrupt the exchange of ideas and damage relationships (Bamidele Roseline & Charity Taripanyefori, 2020) Consequently, dysfunctional conflict hinders the achievement of organizational objectives, resulting in inefficient use of resources and decreased productivity.

**Everybody glorifying the drugs and the free love. That's not how we were raised, but she thinks it's okay to mouth everything.**

The sentence “*Everybody glorifying the drugs and the free love. That's not how we were raised,*



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*but she thinks it's okay to mouth off everything*” reflects a disagreement with the values or behavior of another group. This situation does not always stem from intolerance, but rather from differing moral perspectives. Such a condition illustrates a change in attainments and expectations, which can lead to social conflict when groups are unable to find common ground and each believes their view is correct.

## ***Power Inequality***

Power inequality arises when one group possesses greater authority than another, allowing the dominant group to impose its rules and exert control over the less powerful group (Kriesberg, 1973). Discrimination based on birth, caste, gender, religion, or property often leads to an imbalance in power, authority, and access to resources (Chalaune, 2023). These conditions result in unequal rights and limited opportunities for certain groups. Power inequality, as one form of this injustice, highlights how differences in control and influence can affect people's ability to live with dignity and equality (Chalaune, 2023). Additionally, these conditions arise from conflicting beliefs or principles that are accepted by some but rejected by others, often resulting in social discord.

**From any number of things, growing up in Commonwealth; losing their brother; watching her stepfather walk out the door just when she'd finally started to believe he'd stick around; being forced by federal edict to enter a new school her senior year in a foreign neighborhood not known for letting white kids walk around after sundown.**

The sentence *“being forced by federal edict to enter a new school her senior year in a foreign neighborhood not known for letting white kids walk around after sundown”* highlights the element of coercion, showing how decisions made by those in power can leave others with no choice. This reflects how inequality often begins with a lack of power. As a result, individuals from lower social classes may struggle to express themselves or defend their rights.

**As she falls asleep, she can hear it. Or imagines she can. It's below the asphalt, below the basements and the subflooring. The grid of circuits and conduits and connections that**



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**channel electricity and water and heat that rise up through the wiring and pipes and tubing to power her world.**

The words “hear” and “imagine” followed by the sentence “*The grid of circuits and conduits and connections that channel electricity and water and heat that rise up through the wiring and pipes and tubing to power her world*” reflect the emotional burden of unequal access to basic needs. When power is distributed unfairly, it deepens the sense of exclusion and helplessness. Individuals may feel overwhelmed and powerless to change their situation. This persistent injustice fosters a sense of hopelessness, as they continue to be marginalized by those in control.

**You know who the truly happy countries are? Denmark, Norway, New Zealand, Iceland.**

**You never hear a bad thing about those places. They don't fight, they don't suffer unrest.**

**You never see them on the news. They have unity and prosperity because they stay whole.**

**They stay whole because the races don't mix because there are no races to mix.**

The sentence “*They stay whole because the races don't mix because there are no races to mix*” reflects the presence of racial segregation within the community, contributing to a tense and unwelcoming social atmosphere. This unwillingness to integrate with other racial groups stems from systemic power inequality, which is reinforced by governmental policies and underlying political issues.

**Two of them were dead because they'd tried to kill Corporal Michael "Bobby" Coyne of**

**Dorchester, Massachusetts. But he knew they were really dead because they were in the**

**way. Of profit. Of philosophy. Of a worldview that said rules apply only to the people who aren't in charge of making them.**

The sentence “*Two of them were dead because they'd tried to kill Corporal Michael 'Bobby' Coyne of Dorchester, Massachusetts*” illustrates how those in power are often protected and placed in favorable positions. Individuals with less power are expected to obey the dominant group, often at the expense of their own well-being and autonomy. This creates a continuing cycle in which marginalized groups face various forms of suffering and punishment, regardless of whether the actions of the dominant group are fair or justified.



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**Because I was like a child again. I knew nothing, not even the language. I didn't know their gods, behave. I was just a 22-year-old with a gun.**

The sentence *“Because I was like a child again. I knew nothing, not even the language. I didn't know their gods, to behave. I was just a 22-year-old with a gun”* shows how powerless and confused the speaker felt under the control of a dominant group. It highlights that obeying those in power did not bring any benefit, especially for someone from a lower social class. Instead, they were pressured to follow rules they did not understand. This situation explains how power inequality can lead to social conflict by forcing the less powerful to submit without consideration for their condition or understanding.

**A Phelan brother getting busted is no big deal like a leaf falling from a tree but one of the cops is black. That brings out the neighbors with their loud mouths screaming nigger this and nigger that, and some kids get up on the roofs, and the bottles and the rocks rain down.**

The sentence *“A Phelan brother getting busted is no big deal like a leaf falling from a tree but one of the cops is black. That brings out the neighbours with their loud mouths screaming nigger this and nigger”* illustrates how racism arises from unequal power relations. It shows that certain racial or ethnic groups are unfairly treated by those in authority. This imbalance of power allows discrimination to persist, benefiting the dominant group while harming marginalized communities. Racism not only maintains existing power structures but also justifies their continuation, creating a cycle of oppression and social conflict driven by power inequality.

**Geraldine Guffy says, and then has to wait for the roar of boos to die down, that in some sugar sweet fairy tale land, our kids and the colored kids will become friends**

The sentence *“That in some sugar sweet fairy tale land, our kids and the colored kids will become friends”* reflects a hopeful desire shared by many despite the prevailing reality of racism. Although people are weary of discrimination, they feel powerless to challenge it due to the control exerted by those in authority. This illustrates how power inequality shapes social conditions and contributes to the emergence of social conflict.

**Because there are laws against just arresting people willy-nilly without hard evidence.**



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The sentence “*Because there are laws against just arresting people willy-nilly without hard evidence*” demonstrates that individuals from lower social classes often lack the opportunity to assert their rights. Despite the existence of legal protections, these marginalized groups frequently do not possess the power necessary to defend themselves effectively. This imbalance of power contributes to social conflict by perpetuating the inequalities experienced by the lower class.

**I think the same things most days how easy it is to say you’d kill someone who hurt your child. But there are laws. And consequences. You kill someone, you go to prison. Your kid grows up without you.**

The sentence “*but there are laws. And consequences. You kill someone, you go to prison. Your kid grows up without you*” highlights the limited power of marginalized individuals who struggle to fully exercise their rights. Those with less power often find it difficult to comply with all laws, while people with greater power, resources, and influence are usually better able to follow legal rules. The powerful may adhere to laws to maintain order, protect their position, or avoid penalties.

**You happy?" Jules screamed. No one knew at first who she was screaming at. "You got your buses, you got our school, you're gonna move on to our neighbourhood next?"**

The sarcasm in the sentence “*You got your buses, you got our school, you're gonna move on to our neighborhood next?*” reflects the resistance to desegregation and the reluctance of Black and White communities to integrate. This tension stems from longstanding racial prejudices and historical divisions, where some individuals believed they were superior based on skin color. Such power imbalances contribute to social inequality and are a significant factor leading to social conflict.

**But then? Then I remember that you sold my son the drugs that killed him, you murdered that poor black boy who just wanted to get home and you helped bury my daughter in a basement.**

The sentence “*but then? Then I remember that you sold my son the drugs that killed him, you murdered that poor black boy who just wanted to get home and you helped bury my daughter in a basement*” illustrates how the powerful prioritize their own interests over humanitarian concerns.



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Their actions are motivated by personal gain and political agendas. Meanwhile, the lower class lacks the power to resist or challenge these actions. This dynamic leads to social conflict and reinforces power inequality, resulting in the continued marginalization of the lower class.

**They don't want to be part of the public-school system, and they don't want subway lines or bus lines coming into their towns because they don't want to mix with poor people in general and black people in particular.**

The sentence “*They don't want to be part of the public-school system, and they don't want subway lines or bus lines coming into their towns because they don't want to mix with poor people in general and black people in particular*” reveals the presence of racial discrimination, especially against Black individuals, that begins early and persists across the nation. Educational institutions, meant for learning, have also become spaces influenced by political forces that reinforce racism. This significant social conflict is rooted in power inequality.

**You flood our community with heroin. Rent women out to strangers for money. You molest children. Turn other children into worse versions of you. You rob. And you kill.**

The sentence “*You flood our community with heroin. Rent women out to strangers for money. You molest children. Turn other children into worse versions of you. You rob. And you kill.*” demonstrates that the powerful act without regard for humanity. The wealthy often pursue money without concern for the means, even if it results in unfair treatment of the lower class. Motivated by a desire to maintain their wealth and influence, they may violate rules or ethical standards. Such behavior contributes to social conflict rooted in power inequality.

## CONCLUSION

Based on the explanation in the results and discussion related to social conflict in the novel *Small Mercies*, the researcher identified twenty-six data points on the causes of social conflict, categorized into twelve instances of rank disequilibrium, one instance of change in attainments and expectations, and thirteen instances of power inequality. Although the research is limited to sociological literature, it demonstrates that the novel provides substantial insight into the causes of



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social conflict. Furthermore, understanding social conflict is valuable for analyzing external problems across various fields, helping to identify effective solutions and thereby preventing misinterpretations or inappropriate approaches in conflict resolution. Therefore, the researcher suggests that readers develop the ability to analyze and solve social problems, particularly those related to the causes of social conflict in real life, and to extract moral values from the conflicts depicted.

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