

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

1.1. Background of the Study

Racism against black people, especially African Americans in American society, is not a new issue. Since a long time ago, it has been an issue that has become a concern in many countries, not only in the countries where this issue happened but also in the countries where any act of racism inveighed. For centuries, the show of racism, slaves and indigenous people were sold and exploited to keep the government running. Solomon (2019, 2) claimed that the exploitation system was "justified by race; validated by an ideology of white supremacy and accompanied by a narrative of racial difference." Since long ago, this racial justification towards black people is indicated by the notion that White Americans are considered superior against other races in America, especially African Americans.

Even though people whose race is African American are no longer treated as slaves anymore, the act of racism continues until this era. Nowadays, discrimination against African Americans happens in many forms, such as verbal and physical actions, and established in everyday life through significant institutions. As a result, white people enjoy many privileges in life that cannot be obtained easily by African American people. The established racist behaviour acted by white people upon black people is called as systemic racism.

Systemic racism is a form of discrimination that shows how white superiority is expressed in many aspects of everyday life "at a systems level": by showing society's operation rather than interactions between individuals. These include laws, social, and even education and employment systems (O'Dowd 2020, 3). This type of racism is highly influenced by the 'white racial frame' which includes "whites' broadly positive stereotypes, images, and understandings about whiteness and their negative stereotypes, images, and understandings of Americans of color," especially blacks (Chun 2017, 82).

Therefore, systemic racism "has greatly favored" white Americans. It has happened since the seventeenth century and is still going now. It becomes an umbrella of a wide range of white racist dimensions: "the racist ideology, attitudes, emotions, habits, actions, and institutions of whites in this society" (Feagin 2006, 2). Thus, African Americans suffer from differentiated income, job positions, housing, and family-structure compared to the white (Staddon 2019, 1).

Several shreds of evidence indicate how a person whose race is African American is differentiated from white race people in many aspects of life. For instance, based on Sanders (2020), more than 22% of African Americans live in poverty, while it is only 12% for white Americans. When we pay attention to the health matter, it is found that 31% of African Americans struggle in paying medical bills and 24% of white Americans struggle doing so. Through those two cases, it can be implied that white race people always live in better condition compared to black people.

Another case in this issue also happened in France. It was reported in an online media called Republika.co.id that a Republican Party proposed by senators Jacqueline Eustache-Brinio Applied in the Senate to ban symbols from parents accompanying students to activities outside of school. It also happened in the workplace. Religious symbols for civil servants, within the education environment and government agencies, are prohibited. Of course, in this case, the hijab is more intended because this Muslim dress looks more striking than other religious symbols (Subarkah 2019). This regulation may happen since France always screams for the basis of its statehood, namely *Laïcité* (a country separated by religion and not based on religion).

Last but not least, the case of police brutality recently happened towards an African American man named George Floyd. He got a brutal action by a white race policeman that seems never happens to white American people. As published on CNN news (McLaughlin, 2020), he was seen at the back corner of the police SUV kneeling on Floyd's neck as the face-down Floyd pleads with officers to release him while saying that he cannot breathe

Nevertheless, Baiko (2018, 3) asserted that systemic racism does not mean that everyone in the system is racist. As the opposite, it is a system "that produce racially disparate outcomes regardless of the intentions of the people who work within them." White people are not necessarily racist toward African American people, but systemic racism shapes the racist environment. Moelter (2019, 3) gave several examples of these racial discriminations: which are "selective enforcement of criminal laws; colleges and universities use of legacy admissions

that primarily benefit white people; and voting restrictions that reduces minority voting." It proves that African American people are suffering from discrimination through the systems.

Systemic racism against African American people can be found in many literary works, such as *The Nickel Boys* by Colson Whitehead, *Red at the Bone* by Jacquelin Woodson, and *Such a Fun Age* by Kiley Reid. Further, the issue of systemic racism against African Americans will be discussed in this study. A novel entitled *We Cast A Shadow* written by Maurice Carlos Ruffin (2019) is the object to be analyzed in this study. This novel, Ruffin's debut novel, can be identified as a fantastic novel. It is categorized as a first-person novel where the main character tells the whole story. It raises racism in the USA's social and political environment while depicting a gloomy or pessimistic picture of the main character's world and how they are separated into classes with an instructive framework input to protect contrast in society. There is constant surveillance from the government with almost brutal regulation of society by the authorities. The story raised in this novel makes it defined as a successful novel in elevating the genres of satire, political fiction, and dystopian fiction. Moreover, it is considered so since it has become one of the winners of the PEN Open Book Award Nominee for Longlist 2020. It has also been named one of the best books of the year by NPR and The Washington Post.

Moreover, there have been many great reviews regarding the novel, which show that people are enthusiastic about the story that becomes the novel's

concern. In synopsis, it tells the story of an unnamed narrator from an African American background who has to undergo systemic racism throughout his life. The unnamed narrator is married to a white race woman and gives birth to a son. Even though his son is biracial, but he gradually shows black characteristics on his face instead of showing his mother's white race characteristics.

His son's black spot grows larger and larger, which eventually will make him completely black. Further, the conditions that must be experienced by his father automatically happened in many aspects of his life. Realizing those nasty situations his son encounters makes him think his son should be entirely white to tackle this matter and survive in a society that regards white people as superior and sees the black as vice versa. After reading the story told in this novel, we can completely understand the message underlying its title.

This novel's title provides a vivid depiction of the characters' lives that exist in the story. The words *We Cast A Shadow* become a hint about how most African American people endure their oppressive life within their society where they have to contact white people in which they cannot have a free life. However, they hang on to their life depends on the way the white treats them. Therefore, black lives as the shadow of the white and are not considered a part of society.

This Ruffin's debut novel can be seen as an interesting subject for research purposes. It is said so because even though it is set in the future with advanced technologies, the systemic racism situations which are depicted in the novel are portrayed so thick in every part of it. At the beginning of the story, this novel has

already shown that the main character explains how his life depends on the White's mercy, including his job, housing, and son's education. It strengthens the notion that African Americans and even biracial are inferior against the whites in American society.

Going further in the novel, the way the main character and his son are treated discriminately by other people and hierarchal society in the main character's workplace, notes the existence of systemic racism. The novel also introduces one messed up the way for people to be accepted in society. There is a process called "demelanization" where black people can undergo operations on their skin to look white. This process proves that being white is preferred in society greatly influenced by the white racial frame.

As an African American himself, by creating this novel, Ruffin wants to express that systemic racism is a system that cannot entirely be erased in society life. In an interview that was taken in New Limestone Review (2019), Ruffin explained that "The book is set in the future, but it's really designed to remind people that the issues of white supremacy, racism, bigotry, prejudice these things are always running in the background of the American program." This stunning book shows that systemic racism most likely will happen in America's future if people continue to keep their negative stereotypes against black people, especially African American people.

Since "*We Cast A Shadow*" is still considered as a new novel, there is no study has been found yet. Considering that no research which employs this novel

as its subject of research has existed yet, it is decided to use this novel as a main source of the subject to be analyzed, to present a new and wider insight in literature field especially on the topic of racism as it becomes the main concern of the writing of this novel.

However, several studies have analyzed the systemic or institutionalized racism in African American literary works. A study by Fitri that was conducted in 2009 also raised the racism topic in her research. It discussed institutionalized racism and oppression faced by African American characters, which resulted in physical and mental harm on the characters. Another study analyzed by Kiziltas (2016) explored institutionalized racism against African Americans concerning legislation fields such as education. Meanwhile, Mahmood (2019) examined systemic racism in the scenes of poetry, resulting from negative stereotypes against African Americans.

Comparing to those three previous studies, which also focused on the racism issue, this study still functions as a complementary study to the related studies due to its relativeness in the issue of systemic racism. However, the writer believes that her study is not similar to the previous studies mentioned above since it is focused on how systemic racism in society eventually shapes the main character's way of thinking. Hence, Feagin's theory of oppression is considered appropriate in analyzing the issue in the study. Moreover, the novel *We Cast A Shadow* discussed in this study has not been an object for formal research.

This study attempts to elaborate on the essence of systemic racism in the aspects of the main character's life and how it is eventually implemented in his way of thinking. This issue is significant and exciting for fiction novel readers because it illustrates how African Americans still experience racism in American society. Through this novel's analysis, the writer tries to reveal how the characters in the novel obtain any act of systemic discrimination by focusing on three dimensions of racial oppression theory proposed by Joe R. Feagin. Furthermore, the writer also tries to depict how those systemic racist acts portrayed in this novel can significantly affect the unnamed narrator and his son's thoughts and life. The racism is embedded in many aspects surrounding their society, such as institutions, law, housing, government, and other aspects that white Americans may not realize, but can significantly affect African Americans. Through this study, it is not only expected that the finding can give new and wider insight to the readers but also can be a reminder for global society to fade and omit any act that is signaled as racism by showing how the acts of racism sincerely give negative impacts towards the oppressed race, in which in this case is African American people.

1.2. Statements of the Problem

We Cast A Shadow brings the issue of systemic racism in American society, which is implanted by white supremacy and affects African Americans greatly, which was aimed to be investigated in this research. Therefore, several ideas need to be discussed related to the issue. Thus, the questions below are represented the focus of this research and hoped can be answered, which are:

1. How is systemic racism portrayed in *We Cast A Shadow*?
2. How does the portrayed systemic racism affect the life and thoughts of the main character and his son in *We Cast A Shadow*?

1.3. Objectives of the Study

This research attempts to investigate how the systemic racism portrayed and how it affects the characters in this novel, which can be recognized through these objectives those are:

1. To show the portrayal of systemic racism in *We Cast A Shadow*.
2. To reveal the effect of systemic racism portrayed in *We Cast A Shadow* on the life and thoughts of the main character and his son.

1.4. Significance of the Study

This study may redound to the benefit for both the writer and society to extend our knowledge of systemic racism. Theoretically, the writer expects that this study can contribute to the study of literature by giving more comprehensive understanding and new insight to the readers into further studies about systemic racism issues, especially in the English Department of Universitas Airlangga.

Practically, the writer wishes that by arranging this study it can be useful for the readers and further researchers for the novel *We Cast A Shadow* and in African American criticism so that more studies in African American approach

can be conducted for people to learn more about the life and the struggle of African Americans against racism in American society.

Moreover, this study is meant to widen knowledge regarding racism against African Americans, especially the form of discrimination that can also be found through institutions and thus is called systemic racism. It is beneficial for scholars, but this study is also directed to ordinary people to make them insightful with racism. The writer expects this study to become one of the reading materials for people to raise awareness and understanding regarding systemic racism. It derives from racist ideology and is imbedded in significant institutions and aspects in life such as housing, law, government, education, and culture.

1.5. Definition of Key Terms

- African American (n): Person or people of African descent in American society; usually has dark skin color (Tourse, Wewiorski, and Hamilton-Mason 2018, 132).
- Racism (n): A worldwide chain of command of predominance and inadequacy along the line of the human that have been politically, socially, and financially created and duplicated for centuries by the institutions of the “capitalist/patriarchal western-centric/Christian-centric modern/colonial world system”. (R. Grosfoguel 2011, 14)
- Systemic racism (n): Racial oppression that happens not only in the surface of U.S. society, but has become a system: it has interconnected and

spread through networks, social groups, and institutions across the society (Feagin 2006, 8).

- The white racial frame (n): The negative stereotypes, images, and understanding of African Americans. Positive views and stereotypes toward whites and white institutions (Feagin 2006, 26).

Oppression (n): an enclosing structure that, by way of institutional practice, harms members of a social group, while members of another, or other, corresponding social groups benefit from the harm suffered by those oppressed (Egidius 2007, 2)