

## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

#### 1.1 Background of the Study

The existence of African-Americans in America gets a long struggle of racial emancipation due to the unequal rights practiced toward African-Americans among the American society. One factor of the unequal rights practiced toward the African-Americans is the slavery period where the English colonist enslaved their ancestor, Africans, who were bought by the Dutch to be employed as the labors of tobacco plantation.

According to *Africans in America: America's Journey Slavery*, the Dutch as the major player in maritime monopoly pirated the Spanish's vessels loaded with Africans to be sold as slaves in early seventeenth century. A book author, Charles Johnson and a journalist who was also a playwright, Patricia Smith, recorded in Johnson's *Africans in America* that "A Dutch ship pirated a Spanish vessel full of Africans in August 1619 (Johnson et al 36)". The information stated by a publisher and children's book named Allen F. Davis also states in the same year that, "John Rolfe recorded twenty Negros on a ship were being sold by a bunch of Dutch people in Virginia for food (Davis and Woodman 287)". The Africans, who were sold as indenture servants in America by the Dutch, experienced the same destiny as the White labor immigrants who previously migrated by the English to United States. "The field workers were housed in overcrowded shacks and given barely enough food to fuel their work. They had

little chance to provide for themselves, for nothing was as important as the efficient production of tobacco (37)”.

As an effect of the brutality which was practiced by the colonists, the labors asked for a freedom in order to be free from the pressure. The labors' wish was refused by the mission of Christianity from King James. Therefore, the labors, then, converted their belief to Christianity. Due to the policy that had been a way to help the labors in getting the freedom, the English colonist then, changed the permanent rule which was based on the physical difference to ensure that the tobacco plantations would go on.

As the result, the Africans and the White labors were later unequally treated due to their physical which is different to English and their strength in doing servitude. By this unequally treatment, the Africans then, are considered as good quality slaves. This perception towards Africans then becomes the main reason in treating the generation of Africans differently. As the Africans' descents that are believed as the generation of slaves, they do efforts in purpose to be free from the unequal treatment that based on racial perception. One effort that experienced by African-Americans is double consciousness in which they merge their double identity as the generation of African-American.

In this thesis, the writer is interested to see critically African-Americans' double-consciousness that portrayed in the character of Paul and Jemima, the main African-American character in “Race” and “Ladders” uploaded in afropoets.net due to the characteristics of poetry as one of the literary works that can invite the reader to understand their feeling as the generation of Africans. As

stated by Boas and Smith's *Introduction to Study of Literature*, "Poetry gives pleasure by helping us to understand and sympathize. The poet is keenly sensitive not only to the claims of beauty, but also to the claims of human sympathies. Through sympathy has gained understanding. Poetry can give the pleasure recognition in the first place by various expressions. Thus the poet recreates for us not only a picture or a sensation or an experience, but also the feeling that goes with it (Boas and Smith 79)". It is also agreed by the statement of a journalist, Austin Deborah, "Poetry has always been a part of human history because it can help the readers enter the "thinking-feeling process of the author (Deborah, 1995)".

The poems are written by Elizabeth Alexander, an African-American poet who write and read a poem in Barrack Obama's inauguration. The writer who was born on May 30<sup>th</sup>, 1962 in New York City and grew up in Washington, DC is a lecturer of English language/literature, African-American literature and gender studies at Yale University. She is a daughter of Clifford Alexander, Jr., the former of Equal Employment Opportunity Chairman of United States and Adele Alexander, the teacher of African-Americans women history of George Washington University. Alexander's brother named Mark is a senior adviser of Barrack Obama's presidential campaign and a member of the president-elect's transition team.

The familiar host of Minnesota Public Radio named Tom Crann, states in his *Poet Elizabeth Alexander inspired by rich variety of experiences African-American* that "The scholar poet, is a poet and an essayist who takes her

inspiration from wide range of influence, the history of poetry, the beauty of language, and what she calls as the “rich infinity” of the Afro-Americans experience (Crann, 2005)”. The journalist, Katherine Q. Seelye, also states in her *Obama’s poet pick ‘sings the American song’* in New York Times, December 21<sup>st</sup> 2008 that “Elizabeth Alexander works often reflected of race, gender and class”. *The Poet Receives \$50,000 Prize* in Washington Post, March 16<sup>th</sup>, 2007 reported, “One of her awards and appreciations include a \$50,000 prize for winning the poet election which was held by the committee of three levels poets: Lucille Clifton, Stephen Dunn and Jane Hirshfield in the first annual Jackson Poetry Prize (The Associated press 2007)”.

“Race” is one of Alexander’s poems in her *Antebellum Dream Book* (2001). The Guardian author, Moira Weigel stated in *The Guardian*, 31<sup>st</sup> January, 2009 , “It was also a “twelve-round” poem spoken by Muhammad Ali manages to cram enraging memories of racist violence, as well as poignant self-reflection, into four and five syllable lines that read all the more explosively for having been so condensed” (Weigel, 2009). “Ladders” is one of her collection in *The Venus Hottentot* (1990) that will also be reissued in January. Alexander employs a gallery of ancestors and interlocutors, conjuring Paul Robeson, John Coltrano, Nat Love Romare Bearden, Frida Kahlo and Nelson Mandela among her own relatives, so that the book as a whole comes to effect what she terms “creole montage”. Based on Tregle’s statement in Hirsch and Longsdon’s *Creole New Orleans: Race and Americanization*, “The explication of creole itself, rigid, absolute, and closed to any gradation of meaning: it holds that the word can never

be used except to designate a native Louisianian of pure white blood descendend from those French and Spanish pioneers who came directly from Europe to colonize the New World (Hirsch et al 132)". While Spence and Navarro explained the term of montage in *Crafting Truth: Documentary Form and Meaning*, "The word montage comes from the French word *monter*, "to assemble" (Spence et al 181)". It means that Alexander's works in "The Venus Hottentot" mostly discuss the influence of the White's descendant existence towards the Black's society.

Originally published in 1990, this collection introduced Alexander's vital poetic voice, distinguished by its examination of history, gender, and race. "These poems range from personal memory to cultural history to human personae: John Coltrane, Nelson Mandela, and the Venus Hottentot, a nineteenth-century African woman made into a carnival sideshow exhibit (Robbins, 2004)".

For general illustration, "Race" tells the story about the life experience of the pale-Black man named Uncle Paul, a pale-Black Oregon forester who left Tuskegee, Alabama after marrying to a White woman. He decided to consider himself as a White people except when he met his siblings at Harlem, USA. It is also told that Paul's siblings also changed their identity to be White and married to Black woman. They did not show a harmonious relations when they were having family gathering because Paul prevents his White-wife to meet the siblings' Black spouses. While "Ladders" told a story of Black-fat-woman called Jemima who works for the White by being servant for the White's department store. Surrounded by the White she felt that she was a part of the White although she was physically Black.

Considering the previous explanation about the issue that will be discussed in this and the supporting background of the chosen poems, this thesis will apply African-American Criticism that focuses on double consciousness in the discussion as the most appropriate theory to be used in this study. This theory is applied in order to see that the African-Americans' double consciousness are clearly portrayed in Alexander's poems "Race" and "Ladders".

### **1.2 Statements of the Problems**

In order to see how the double consciousness is experienced by the Great Uncle Paul and Aunt Jemima portrayed in the poems as African-Americans, there are the statement of the problem that will be analyzed in the discussion:

1. How is the double consciousness experienced by Great Uncle Paul and Jemima portrayed in "Race" and "Ladders" poems?

### **1.3 Objectives of the Study**

Based on the statements of the problem above, the purposes of the paper analysis is:

1. To describe the double consciousness experienced by Great Uncle Paul and Jemima as African-Americans portrayed in "Race" and "Ladders" poems.

#### **1.4 Significance of the Study**

Alexander's "Race" and "Ladders" are narrative poems written by Afro-American scholar poet named Elizabeth Alexander that represent a social-life of African-Americans who lived 1930 and 1953. Therefore, the study of this thesis aims at the portrayal of African-Americans' life through the illustration of Great Uncle Paul in "Race" and Jemima in "Ladders" as a representation of African-Americans double consciousness. By understanding the poems illustration about Great Uncle Paul and Jemima and the meaning conveyed by the poems' title, the study is expected to be able to represent the African-Americans social life.

In addition, hopefully that the study will become worthy additional work to study about Alexander's "Race" and "Ladders" and can contribute towards to the study of Literature particularly in English Department of Humanities Faculty of Airlangga University in terms of African-American literary studies related to the historical and social factors that represent in the narrative poems written by the African-American scholar poet.

#### **1.5 Scope and Limitations**

"Race" and "Ladders" are the poems written by one familiar African-Americans poet named Elizabeth Alexander. These chosen poems mainly discussed about the problematic life of African-Americans who lived in America through the representation of the character Paul who lived in 1930 as mentioned in "Race" and Jemima, a servant who lived in 1953 as mentioned in "Ladders". Owing to the year and the country mentioned in the poems, therefore, the writer of

this thesis would like to focus on the discussion about the case of African-Americans double consciousness that is represented through the character of Paul in “Race” and Jemima in “Ladders” related to the social condition occurring in the year as mentioned in both poems.

In organizing the analysis, the first point will mainly discuss about the poems illustration. Then, after elaborating the poems illustration, the discussion will be continued to the meaning conveyed in “Race” and “Ladders”. At last, these two previous discussions will be related to the case of Paul and Jemima’s as the representation of African-Americans’ living in America in that time. The topics of the analysis in this thesis also include the speaker’s view, which is mentioned as “I” in both poems, in perceiving Paul and Jemima as the African-Americans represented in the poems.

## **1.6 Theoretical Background**

This part mainly discusses about the theory to be applied in this thesis discussion. *Jonathan Culler* stated in *Literary Theory: A Very Short Introduction*, that “Theory in literary studies is not an account of the nature of literature or methods for its study. It’s a body of thinking and writing whose limits are exceedingly hard to define (3)”.

Since the two chosen poems represent the African-Americans in the main character Paul in “Race” and Jemima in “Ladders” who lived in America in the year of 1930 and 1953, the most appropriate theory that will be applied in the discussion is African-American Criticism which focuses on double consciousness



as the subdivision of the theory. Therefore, the discussion of this thesis deal with the criticism of an American sociologist, historian, civil rights activist, Pan-Africanist figure who also a descent of African-American, W.E.B. Du Bois, to see the African-Americans portrayed in the character of Paul and Jemima.

As a support, the discussions also include the description about the historical period of American 19<sup>th</sup> century. This related information is intended to guide the readers, so that they will have a deeper understanding in viewing the double identity of Paul as the portrait of African-Americans among the United States society at that time. The American 19<sup>th</sup> century historical period that will be included in this discussion is the period that lasts in 1930 and 1953.

### **1.7 Method of the Study**

In purpose to analyze the study, the writer uses qualitative method in the form of data collecting. In *Integrating Quantitative And Qualitative Methods In Research*, Taylor stated that “Qualitative research methods are considered to be valid techniques for conducting research (4)”. The data collecting is done after doing close reading to the poem. Here, the writer reads critically both “Race” and “Ladders” poems which are the primary sources of data collection in this study in purpose to get what inside text is.

After understanding the text inside, the data analysis then is done by illustrating the poems. The poem illustration is done through elaborate each part and stanza of the poems, select the data which portrays the social life of African-

Americans in the characterization of Paul from “Race” and Jemima from “Ladders” who experience double consciousness.

Furthermore, the selected data then will be related to the assumption of the poems meaning based on the reader’s own interpretation. Finally, the selected data then will be analyzed using the theories, so it will be clear to the readers in comprehending this study. In purpose to support the analysis, the related data collection from secondary sources is also included. Therefore, the writer includes the printed books, journals and online articles that are derived from written and online source as the secondary source of data collection.

### **1.8 Definition of Key Terms**

African-Americans	: The Americans people who inherits the Africans’ genetics. The Negroes.
Double Consciousness	: The double visions or double identities in one self.
White	: The jargon call for the white-skinned western (European) people represented in poems.
white	: The color or light-skinned people.
Black	: The jargon call for the black-skinned African origin.
black	: The color for dark-skinned people such African-Americans.

- Jemima : The main character in “Ladders”.
- Jemima* : The name of familiar mammy existed in Jim Crow era.
- Pale-Black : The descent of Black and White American who is physically non-black-skinned.