

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background of the Study

Discrimination towards people of color or minorities' ethnicity has always been a problem that is yet to be solved. As stated by Cross (2020, 626), discrimination based on race or racism is the manifestation of the belief of institutionally approved white supremacy in the United States. Generally, a dominant group or a group that considered themselves the superior ones would always try to maintain their position by oppressing the minority group (Huda 2017, 200). In addition, members of the dominant group are unlikely to be reminded of their differences while experiencing prejudice or disadvantage because of their race (Doane Jr. 1997). Discriminating against other people who appear to be different judging from their skin color or ethnicity is done as a way for the dominant group to keep their prominent power and status in society. Subsequently, racial-based discrimination or racism is the result of how the members of a particular racial group share the same negative perspective that is supported by legal authority and institutional control towards the other racial group (DiAngelo 2018). It has grown to embrace a wide range of social phenomena in the sociology of race and ethnicity, including structural inequalities, institutional discrimination, internalized stereotypes, and racial attitudes (Shiao and Wood 2021). In addition, it may also happen in a situation where numerous opportunities, access to public places, and/or

services are continually intended for white Americans with the thought of excluding people of color from the scenario.

One of the examples of oppression directed towards minority ethnic groups is the experiences of African Americans, or black people, in the United States. For a long time, African Americans were subjugated and exploited by white Americans, which occurred in several different institutions. The racial discrimination towards African Americans that is happening currently is deeply rooted in the slavery that occurred in the early 17th century. At that time, a lot of Africans were kidnapped and enslaved by the Americans who colonized them (Feagin 2006). Slavery had become a good business for the Americans as it raised their economic conditions by exploiting the black slaves (Berlin 2004). Reading and writing were a privilege for black slaves in that era, as they were not allowed to do so. The segregation and inequalities that African Americans in the United States have had to go through can be seen as an example of systemic racism. According to Feagin (2006), systemic racism is an unfair system that creates and perpetuates the poverty of African Americans for the benefit of whites.

The term of systemic racism, also known as institutional racism was first coined by Kwame Ture (Stokely Carmichael) and Charles V. Hamilton in their book titled *Black Power: The Politics of Liberation in America* in 1967. Individual racism, as Ture and Hamilton (1992) stated, is when it is done through violent action that causes death, injury, or property destruction. On the other hand, institutional racism or systemic racism can not be as easily identified as individual racism. While institutional racism stems from the actions of well-established and

respected organizations in society, it gets significantly less public criticism than individual racism (Ture and Hamilton 1992). When an African American becomes the victim of predatory by merchants or slave masters and is imprisoned in filthy slum housing, it's what can be inferred as institutional or systemic racism. In addition, systemic racism is based on the active and widespread operation of anti-black attitudes and actions, which are done by white Americans.

For the purpose of white economic domination, white Americans have been profiting from African Americans through slavery and then through labor exploitation. During the 1920s, there were many labor vacancies in America caused by World War I, which ended in 1918. These opportunities led an abundant number of African Americans to move to the industrial areas of the country even though they were still discriminated against and segregated in a lot of public places. Soon to be known as the Great Migration or Black Migration, a lot of African Americans left the Southern area for the Northern area of the United States due to the decline in economic conditions in the South (Tolnay 2003). Initially, African Americans that lived in the South were segregated in many aspects because of the Jim Crow law that deprived them of their own rights as human beings. This law is one of the examples of systemic racism that has been highly influenced by the concept of white racial frame. According to Chun (2017), the white racial frame encompasses both the white's positive stereotypes, ideas, and understandings of whiteness and the white's negative point of view and understanding of people of color in America. Systemic racism shows how laws, traditions, and behaviors generate racial injustices towards people of color in America. Black people's right to vote was

taken away due to Jim Crow laws and every facet of African American's lives was under the control of institutions dominated by white American (Thompson-Miller 2011, 8).

Systemic racism exists in the education, institution, housing, and employment systems which gives African Americans more disadvantages. As a lot of African Americans were illiterate and poor. They did not have the option to obtain higher education or have the proper occupation due to the laws that oppressed them. When the Great Migration happened, Chicago was one of the cities in the northern area that had jobs opening for African Americans in factories, restaurants, and households. However, they were quickly disappointed because there was still discrimination in the Northern. According to Fremon (2000), African Americans in the North were frequently the last to be employed and the first to be fired, while also getting the most insignificant and low-paying jobs. Naturally, not only are they exploited but also marginalized everywhere they go.

The issue of racism can be seen and conveyed in various forms of media, specifically through film. A film or movie has the ability to change society, culture, and even the law if the film is impactful enough. It can influence the view of gender and racial stereotypes, shift attitudes towards particular groups of people, and form new viewpoints on a variety of issues (Kubrak 2020). The depiction of racism in movies varies, including the element of fantasy, action, gender, etc. *The Hate U Give* (2019) is one example of a movie that brings up the issue of racism alongside the cruelty of police brutality and white supremacy (Arani and Thoyibi 2021). The movie attempts to highlight how African Americans are portrayed by the media in

a negative light and how they are presented as if to dehumanize them. Another movie that also depicts racial discrimination issues while adding the component of gender is *Hidden Figures* (2016). The movie *Hidden Figures* challenged the idea that the elements of race and gender do intersect with one another, especially when it comes to the discrimination against African Americans (Pasaribu 2019).

The depiction of systemic racism can be seen in the movie titled *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* released in 2020, and it is examined in this study. The movie is originally based on a play written by August Wilson in 1982 with the same title. The 2020 version of the play is directed by George C. Wolfe and produced by Denzel. Based on a real-life African American musician, *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* tells the story of Ma Rainey (Viola Davis), who was well known for her blues music and unique voice. Being set in 1927 Chicago, the movie focuses on Ma Rainey and her jazz band which includes Toledo (Glynn Turman), Cutler (Colman Domingo), Slow Drag (Michael Potts), and Levee (Chadwick Boseman). The story mainly takes place in the recording studio as they are about to record Ma's songs with the assistance of her white manager, Irvin (Jeremy Shamos), and white song producer, Mel Sturdyvant (Jonny Coyne). Living as a African American blues singer, Ma refuses to let her white bosses and band crew dictate her actions and her way with music. As the band waits in the studio's small rehearsal room, tension starts to rise between the ambitious Levee as the young generation to African American wanting to make his way in the music industry and Ma Rainey as the old generation of African American. Sparks of conflict begin when Levee rejects the band and Ma Rainey's instructions on how to play her music. Instead,

Levee wants to have his own band and record by selling his songs to Mel Sturdyvant.

Ma Rainey's Black Bottom movie earns a 97% rating on Rotten Tomatoes and 6.9 out of 10 stars from 51,000 users on IMDb. The movie also won several awards and received numerous nominations from different awards shows. In addition, the movie's costume design, along with makeup and hairstyling aspects, gained a lot of attention as it managed to obtain many awards, including Oscars for Best Achievement in Makeup and Hairstyling as well as in Costume Design at the 93rd Academy Awards in 2021. Moreover, the leading actors and actresses of the movie, Viola Davis and Chadwick Boseman, have broken the record as the first black actors to win the lead acting categories at the Screen Actors Guild Awards in 2021.

Released on November 25th 2020, *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* movie aired in the same year as the George Floyd Protest as part of the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement, which occurred in May 2020. The BLM movement started in 2014 as a protest of black citizens' way of fighting for their civil rights, racial justice, and police reform (Reny and Newman 2021, 1499). Furthermore, the movie was released at the same time as the 2020 presidential election, when Donald Trump and Joe Biden were competing for the seat. Donald Trump, who was formerly assigned as the President at that moment, is known for being pro-police and a supporter of "All Lives Matter." In one of his speeches, he openly expressed his opposition to the BLM 'movements by saying, "I think they are trouble. I think they are looking for trouble" (Sherfinski 2015). The BLM movement was also said to

possibly occur as an agenda for the current President, Joe Biden, a Democrat, as a way to increase the number of his voters (Mutz 2022).

Several previous studies have been conducted with a similar issue and object. These will be used to support this study. The first study is an undergraduate thesis entitled "Systemic Racism Toward Ethnic Minorities in The First Purge (2018) Movie" by Indah Fitriarsi (2020). This study focuses on white economic domination as the source of racism. The second study is an undergraduate thesis conducted by Wayan Swari Mahayoni titled "Negotiating Systemic Racism through American Dream in MCFARLAND, USA (2015) Movie." This study investigates how Mexican Americans use American Dream as a solution to combat racial inequality. The third related study is a journal titled "A New Historicist Reading of August Wilson's *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*" done by Mahdi Sepehrmanesh. This study attempts to investigate August Wilson's *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* play using the concepts of new historicist theorists. The fourth related study is a journal titled "Racial Oppression against African American Slaves in Harriette Gillem Robinet's *Forty Acres and Maybe a Mule*," done by Ovriza Dien Kartika and Titien Diah Soelistyarini. The journal talks about how systemic racism operates and how it relates to white economic domination in the *Forty Acres and Maybe a Mule* novels written by Harriette Gillem Robinet. The last related study is also a journal titled "Institutional Racism and Black Resistance as Portrayed through Images and Narratives in American Graphic Novels" and was conducted by Titien Diah Soelistyarini, Nuril Rinahayu, and Ridha Dinauri Nuswantari. The journal discusses the portrayal of white racial frame and the embedded racist ideology practiced in

two graphic novels. Unlike the previous studies mentioned with similar issues and objects, the writer will be focusing on researching how systemic racism is practiced and how African Americans respond to the systemic racism they face in *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* (2020). Thus, these related studies will be utilized as references for the writer to conduct the analysis.

A study on *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* (2020) movie is worth analyzing because the movie might portray the six key elements of systemic racism that leads to white economic domination while also giving highlight to the trauma felt by African descendants both from the old and young generation. The movie calls attention to the challenging realities that African American artists must deal with. Not only are they subjected to unfair treatment, but there is also a possibility that their music may be taken away and altered in a way to remove any trace of their identity. In addition to this, the movie also focuses on a historical figure who was significant to the Blues music genre, namely Ma Rainey. Ma Rainey was one of the first African Americans to record her songs for future generations. The movie also explores the older generation that still believes in the importance of preserving the long-established culture such as Ma Rainey, Toledo but also mentions the ambitions of younger generations such as Levee. Consequently, the fact that systemic racism is still a problem makes it worthwhile to examine it in depth. The evidence of it can be seen by the many racial profiling and police brutality cases.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

From the background study that has been described above, the primary question of this study is as follow:

1. How is systemic racism practiced in *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* (2020) movie?
2. How is the response of African American characters towards systemic racism practiced in the movie?

1.3 Objectives of the study

As seen from the statement of the problem mentioned before, the objective of this study is:

1. To discover how systemic racism is practiced in *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* (2020) movie.
2. To explore the response of African Americans towards systemic racism in *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* (2020) movie.

1.4 Significance of the Study

This study aims to give a deeper understanding of how African Americans are discriminated against and how they are exploited in a movie entitled *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*. From this study, the writer hopes that the readers will be able to grasp the concept of racial discrimination that stems from society as well as institutions. The movie serves as a reminder of African Americans' struggle and resilience towards the oppression they faced wherever they went. Additionally, a

lot of minority ethnic groups that live in a big country that upholds white supremacy beliefs may relate to this issue. Moreover, the writer hopes that this study can provide useful information for the readers, especially English Department students, who would like to understand the issue much better.

1.5 Definition of Key Terms

Systemic Racism : A material, social, and ideological reality deeply ingrained in key American institutions which consist of racist ideology, attitudes, feelings, habits, behaviors, and domination of white (Feagin 2006)

African American : Ethnic group of descendants of enslaved Africans in the United States (Locke & Deryl 2013)

White Economic Domination : The act of channeling and subordinating non-white people's labor which aims to enhance the material profit for white Americans (Feagin 2006).