

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background of the Study

Systemic racism is perhaps best resembled by the term “hidden iceberg”, this statement is popularized by Gilbert Gee and Annie Ro (in Braveman et al, 2022). This analogy is a representation that systemic racism is a big thing that is not visible, thus the term "hidden iceberg", and a small visible part is only the overt racism that is easily recognized such as discrimination and racist treatment. In order to evaluate the potentially traumatic effects of racism, Carter (2007, 17) said that one needs to recognize the differences in "systematic, covert, subtle, and unconscious forms of racism" to know each difference among African Americans. Unlike any other types of racism, take interpersonal racism, for instance, systemic racism could be more demeaning and dangerous because it greatly benefits one race and harms others on an institutional level enlarging racial disparities among races. While interpersonal racism concerns the beliefs, attitudes, and actions towards others of a different race. Interpersonal racism is the type of racism that exists when a person interacts with another and their racial preferences influence their behavior in public. Systemic racism, on the other hand, takes the experiences of inequality by racial minorities to continuously exist even without the presence of interpersonal racism (Henry and Tator 2006). In compliance with a poll from a press release conducted by Kaiser Family Foundation (kff.org, 2022), a non-profit organization

that focuses on United States National health issues, 71% of African Americans claim that they have encountered some type of racial discrimination or abuse during their lives with 48% of them say that their life was in danger because of their race. Some of the cases of racism are simply subtle and not obvious, but it is still evident in the injustices experienced as models for how the law would be implemented in court or how the authorities handle African Americans legally.

Such emergence has existed prolongedly in American history. The history of African Americans' racism began with the existence of African slavery in the first decade of American Colonialism in the 17th century. Since then, slavery has been prevalent for about 350 years, or around 90% of the United States' history, and has only been free from it for 10% of the country's history (Feagin 2006, 2). During slavery, African Americans were denied access to decent housing, public amenities, and schools. They also experienced frequent abuse from both slaveowners and law enforcement. This was an era when segregation law was still in power. The segregation era lasted from 1896 to 1964. This law is often also known as the Jim Crow Laws. In the same year, the Supreme Court of the United States ruled in *Plessy vs. Ferguson* that "separate but equal" was a widely accepted legal principle. Jim Crow laws mandated racial segregation in all public facilities in the former Confederate States of America and a number of other states beginning in the 1870s. The contents of the segregation law that are very detrimental to African Americans include: separation of schools, public places, public transportation and rest rooms, restaurants and even drinking taps for white and black people. The Jim Crow Laws violated the thirteen and fourteenth amendments

each which says “abolishes slavery or involuntary servitude except in punishment for a crime” and as a consequence, today, just like in the past, oppression against African Americans is a major system in the American society’s structure; a systemic one throughout all major institutions.

The term systemic racism is intended to the racist ideology that has become embedded in the laws and regulations of society. Moreover, systemic racism is defined by Sir William Macpherson (1999) as an organization's collective failure to provide an appropriate and professional service to people based on their race, ethnicity, or culture. Processes, attitudes, and behaviors that constitute discrimination against minorities are tainted by prejudice, ignorance, carelessness, and racist stereotyping. Tourse, Hamilton-Mason, and Wewiorski (2018, 13) suggest that the sectors of Society act as an Interconnected Institutional Web covering military, religion, legal, healthcare, education, housing, government, financial, social services, and industry. These sectors make up the interconnected society and within it exists racism towards African Americans. The issue of systemic racism is prolongedly associated with African American literature. This issue is also experienced and written in literature of other ethnic minorities in the United States. Asian Americans, Native Americans, and Hispanic Americans are also writing about the experiences of the lives of the marginalized (Miniotaité 2020,). But in most cases, this is more common in African American literature. This is proven by the characteristics of African American Literature that revolve around the concerns of identity, position in the dominant society, as well as freedom, and independence. Some of the issues explored within African American literature

include the role of African Americans in greater American society, African – American culture, racism, slavery, and equality (Ogene 2013). The international community has generally agreed that racism in the United States constitutes a violation of human rights and has called for an end to the practice. In 2016, a group with ties to the United Nations and its headquarters in Geneva, Switzerland, put forth the idea of providing reparations to African Americans. It is impossible for us to continue existing as human beings if we did not have human rights because these rights are inextricably linked to living a dignified and respected life. The protection of individual liberty, the assurance of social justice, and the maintenance of social order are some of the essential rights that must be upheld in order to safeguard our other rights and freedoms. However, despite equal protection rights and anti-discrimination laws, the United States has failed to shield its citizens from racism. African Americans continue to be racially profiled and murdered at alarming rates, provoking public outrage but few solutions (Achiume 2017).

The impacts of systemic racism are experienced in daily life and are depicted in literature. Numerous famous literary works have been influenced by actual occurrences surrounding the problem of racism. For instance, *The Bluest Eye* (1970) by Toni Morrison, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1969) by Maya Angelou, and one of the most recent African American novels; *The Nickel Boys* (2019) by Colson Whitehead. According to Thohiriyah's (2019) research, life after legal segregation is no easier than before. This study examines beloved's systemic racism. The 1987 novel *Beloved* deals with slavery. After the Civil War, slavery and legal segregation are gone. At the end of the novel, the characters cut their

children's throats to escape slavery (Thohiriyah 2019). The study looked at how racism and slavery strengthen white supremacy and affect former slaves. According to an analysis of the 1987 novel *Beloved*, slavery and racism reinforce white dominance over African American slaves even after legal segregation ends. No previous studies on the novel *Riot Baby* have been done before. Though similar studies on systemic racism upon novels are abundant in numbers. For instance, a study conducted by Roikhana in 2020 entitled *Let Him Be White': Exploring Systemic Racism In Maurice Carlos Ruffin's We Cast A Shadow* was also done to depict systemic racism in the novel, the study aims to prove that the existence of systemic racism affect one's mind. In regards to these previous studies, this study aims to portray systemic racism and its impact, but not only its impact on one's mind, this study seeks to look at many sectors, for example the health, psychological, and socioeconomic sectors.

Psychologically speaking, the impact of systemic racism disturbs the mental, physical, and social conditions of the discriminated. This includes; the likelihood of PTSD and death (Institute of Medicine 2003), disparities in wage and employment prospects, and unequal distribution of social advantages such as education (Blesset and Vanessa 2014). A constant feeling of fear can also be included as one of the psychological impacts of systemic racism, as an African American man, Westbrook says he must always be on guard because police officers may pull him over or follow him in a specific area at any time (2014, 2). Furthermore, data shows that African American people live in constant fear of violence. An encounter based on a person's race, which is perceived as racism, is a

stressor that causes coping mechanisms as well as psychological and physiological stress reactions, and that can have a negative impact on the health of African Americans. In the health sectors, in addition to the high trend of heart disease as claimed by Clark in a study on cardiovascular reactivity and found that African Americans had higher rates of high blood pressure (1999), inequalities such as racialized bias in the provision of health facilities to African Americans are also still there is. Firstly, researchers think that elevated and long-lasting sympathetic responses, like higher resting systolic blood pressure, are caused by persistent views of racism and passive ways to deal with it. This, in turn, leads to hypertension. Blascovich, Spencer, Quinn, and Steele (2001), whose research backs up this theory, have shown that even subtle racism, like stereotyping, can cause African Americans' blood pressure to go up, and that repeated short-term rises in blood pressure may lead to chronic hypertension. In situations where their lives are in danger, health care facilities continue to be extremely racist and disadvantage African Americans. Lastly, as mentioned earlier, the wage and employment outlook, as well as the unequal distribution of social advantages such as education, are indicators of the disparities in socioeconomic status that exist among African Americans (Blesset and Vanessa 2014). The rates of high school dropouts and graduates and college enrollments are lower among African Americans than it is among other races. In 2016, the unemployment rate for African Americans was 4 percent higher than the rate for whites, which was 4 percent. The average income of whites is significantly greater than that of blacks in the same year. Whites earn an average of \$54,700 per year, while blacks earn in the range of \$49,400.

Riot Baby is a contemporary dystopian novel about the lives of two African American main characters; Ella and Kev. This novel talks about the reality of African Americans who have to constantly struggle with racism. This novel is packed with sci-fi stories that are relevant to the lives of teenagers and has a very deep message about racism, especially for citizens of the United States. Tochi Onyebuchi, the author, is famous for his sci-fi young adult novels which always leave a deep impression on their readers. *Riot Baby* itself, among other sci-fi novels of his, has received abundant awards. It won the 2021 Alex Award, World Fantasy Award and Ignite Award for Best Novella, and nominated in many other prestigious awards. The dystopian atmosphere in the *Riot Baby* novel is very visible with the fantasies used to fight current and future acts of racism in the novel.

The dystopian novel's communities and situations are sometimes made up and act as a warning of what might happen in the future and are used in many literary works to reveal real fears within an individual or a particular group or even an escape from reality. Different fears are expressed uniquely in each dystopian novel on the basis of humanity's longing for a stable society (Kalafut 2019, 8). An oppressed community would want a condition where they can be free from oppression. This state of being free from oppression and systemic racism becomes the "stable society" that African Americans long for. Tochi Onyebuchi, the author of *Riot Baby* began writing *Riot Baby* in 2015, when he realized that footages of police brutality against African Americans were rapidly spreading.

During the first half of the twentieth century, dystopian literature hit its peak. After World War II, one of the most influential dystopian novels ever written, 1984, was published. Its primary purpose was to caution readers about totalitarianism. In a similar vein, the primary purpose of the African American dystopia is to serve as a cautionary tale. Following the racial reckoning of this genre, the African American dystopian fiction subgenre is experiencing a resurgence in the form of a hysteria. After the success of Marvel's Black Panther (2018) in the movie industry, an increasing number of African American authors are delving into the realm of science fiction. Combining history and future dystopia, *Riot Baby* has relevance to the 1992 Rodney King riot that took place in Los Angeles. Tochi Onyebuchi said during an interview with National Public Radio that one of the main characters, Ella, did live through the 1992 uprising conflicts in Los Angeles, which is to say, the Rodney King riot (npr.org 2020). *Riot Baby* tells a lot about systemic racism in the United States. Both of its main characters are African Americans who deem to experience racism on a daily basis. Not only those two characters, the other African American characters in the novel undergo similar experiences of injustice and mistreatment due to their race.

1.2 Statement of the Problems:

With the urgency of systemic racism in the United States and its reflection on African Americans novels, the researcher would like to answer the following research questions:

1. How is systemic racism portrayed in Tochi Onyebuchi's *Riot Baby*?

2. How does systemic racism affect the lives of African American characters in the novel?

1.3 Objectives of the study:

After conducting a study on systemic racism in *Riot Baby*, this study aims to:

1. Reveal how systemic racism towards African American characters is portrayed in the novel.
2. Portray how systemic racism affects African American characters' lives in the novel.

1.4 Significance of the Study:

A vast majority of African American novels theme lies on systemic racism; therefore, it is quite common to be used as the central theme of an African American literature. For African-American literature fans, this topic should be crucial and fascinating since it allows us to dig deeper into the African American's experiences on racism especially in the United States. However, there have not been many studies regarding racism issue on an African American dystopia. The primary goal of the researcher is to make a contribution to the study of literature, particularly in the English Department of Universitas Airlangga and the Faculty of Humanities at Universitas Airlangga, focusing on issues surrounding systemic racism and dystopian novels. It is hoped that this research can be used as a guide to understanding the systemic racism depicted in the novel *Riot Baby* (2019) and how it is affecting the lives of African American characters in the novel. This research

was carried out in order to achieve this objective. It is also anticipated that this research will be put to use in a practical capacity by academics in the conduct of future research regarding African American criticism and systemic racism to analyze literary works.

1.5 Definition of Key-Terms:

1. **Systemic Racism:** Institutionalized marginalization of people of color and practices that indicate dominance over people of color (Ducey and Feagin 2017).
2. **African American:** An American of a negroid race or African descendant.
3. **Oppression:** The suppression of an individual's or a socially subordinate group's free will by the dominant group in order to demonstrate inferiority within the socially subordinate group in order to maintain power and dominance over them (Tourse, Hamilton-Mason, and Wewiorski 2018).