

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background of the Study

According to Green on her journal article “perspective on multiculturalism and cultural diversity”, racial stereotypes are constructed beliefs that all members of the same race share given characteristics. These attributed characteristics are usually negative such as images of the Sambo, Jim Crow, the Savage, Mammy, Aunt Jemimah, Sapphire, and Jezebel may not be as powerful today, yet they are still alive (1999). These kinds of black people stereotype have become the racial issues that still exist in black people life, even in the film. Although many critic have appeared in concerning this racial stereotype in dealing with reducing the bad images of black people but the fact of its existence cannot be denied, even in African American women films.

Regarding African American women stereotypes, Briana McKoy states on his journal article about Tyler Perry work on female characters. Perry who is African American is known as one of the biggest names in entertainment as a black celebrity, a leading figure in black film, theatre, production, and director. It shows that some of his work as director present female character based on stereotypical characteristic like “mammy” which is associated with a submissive servant in white people house, “sapphire” domineering female who consumes men and usurps their role, and “jezebel” labeled as sexually promiscuous and immoral. This stereotype of his work can be seen in his film such as *Madea’s Family Reunion* (2006), *Meet the Browns* (2009), *I Can Do Bad All By Myself* (2009), and

Madea Goes to Jail (2009). From this perspective, it shows that the stereotypes of black female are still very significant in the films as the media to deliver information about black female. Moreover, the director of those films is African American that surely is more understand with the black female circumstances in their own society.

From the existence of portrayal black female stereotype in film, the racism toward black female become higher in perceiver knowledge because people know and believe on what they see. In this perspective, people believe on what they see and hear from the media about black female stereotype. This action leads people to think about binary opposition on which race is good or bad. As cited in Tyson “racialism refers to the belief in racial superiority, inferiority, and purity based on the conviction that moral and intellectual characteristics, just like physical characteristics which are biological properties that differentiate the races” (360). From the statement above, the difference physical and culture with another lead people to have different status. This act of racialism happens not only in the films but also in the real black female life. In this case, the racial issues toward black female also strengthen with the condition of black female society today. Even though, in this era many black females show and prove their breakthrough development in many kinds of achievement but the racial problems toward black female are still significant.

According to Maria Guerra who is a senior at the University of California, Los Angeles and an intern with the Progress 2050 team at the Center for American Progress which provide progressive idea for a strong, just, and free

America based on her research in the *Fact Sheet*, “African American women, who make up 13 percent of the female population in the United States, are making significant strides in education, participation, health, and other areas, but there is a long way to go to fully close the racial and ethnic disparities they face”. This research puts African American women’s health today is one of the problems in their society. It can be seen from the research that ‘one in four African American women is uninsured’. It is followed by the lack of health insurance and other socioeconomic factors. It continues to contribute to the dire health issues African American women face. Another problem that African American women face is education. ‘The problem about education shows that the level of educational attainment for African American women has risen very slowly and still sits at a significantly lower level than that of white women’. Furthermore, ‘African American women continue to have higher rates of unemployment than white women and continue to have lower amounts of weekly usual earnings and median wealth compared to their male counterparts and white women’. These disparities leave a growing portion of their population more vulnerable to poverty and its implications. From the entrepreneurship side, ‘African American women-owned businesses continue to grow despite significant financial and social obstacle’ (Center for American Progress).

From those black female problems, it shows that many black female today still in pain. In this case, black female are largely facing many oppression through the inequalities of life such the facts depicted above. Actually, black people have already tried to reduce the oppression as cited in Bressier, “the African

American's search for personal identity; the bitterness of the struggle of black men and women in America to achieve political, economic, and social success; and both mild and militant pictures of racial protest and hatred, these authors gave America the personal portraits of what it meant to be black writer struggling with personal, cultural, and national identity" (249). Furthermore, the Declaration of Independence says that 'all men are created equal'; the practice has not been really applied in America especially for black female. They still live in a dreadful condition and become the inferior in human existence. This also represents on how black female live in patriarchy society which forced them to be submissive one and the oppression that makes them hardly to talk about their own condition. This action actually happens also to white and women in general, but it is harder to black female.

Based on the rare voice related to the black female oppression, it is probably not suitable for white people to describe the dreadful situation toward black female. According to Bell Hooks in *Race and Representation*, black females have "their own reality, their own history, their own gaze, - one which the sees the world rather differently from 'anyone else' (128). From this case, black female is the most suitable one to present their own reality and oppression because they deal with those experiences directly. Moreover Hooks' also says the "attention of "true" telling of black female experience. The black female voice that was deemed "authentic" was the voice in pain; only the sound of hurting that could be heard" (44). It can be conveyed that black female wants to show their voice toward the oppression and suppression in their own society. In this case, the right people to

share their oppression are black female themselves. Since telling a true story is more accurate when the first speaker who experiences the oppression talks about the oppression circumstances, it will be more accurate.

Through the powerful oppression justification of their existence, the stereotypes of black female have appeared from a long time ago and it still exists today. As Cheryl Gilkes cited in Patricia Hill Collins book about black feminist thought, “black women's assertiveness and their use of every expression of racism to launch multiple assaults against the entire fabric of inequality have been a consistent, multifaceted threat to the status quo. “As the punishment, black women have been assaulted with a variety of negative images” (69). From this kind inequality toward black female, it produces much oppression and ended by portraying them with the image of black female. From the stereotype that depicted to black female, Collins’ stated in her statement, “African-American women as stereotypical mummies, matriarchs, welfare recipients, and hot mommas help justify U.S. Black women’s oppression” (69). In this case, people who judge black female should be more critical and smart by seeing what is behind their stereotype.

The examples black female stereotypes issues have been analyzed and represent largely in many films. Some of them are *The Help* (2011), and *Diary of Mad Black Woman* (2005). In Tate Taylor’s *The Help*, the character of Aibileen Clark (Viola Davis) is a 50-year-old black maid spending her life raising white children and recently lost her only son to an industrial accident with no one care of her pain. She is portrayed as mammy stereotype which are overweight and dark

skin. The character of Clark is the mammy figure who is obedient to her white mistresses (*The Help* 2011).

Furthermore, Ella Taylor (2011) wrote in the website that concerning in art & life and movies; “*The Help* films describe the black female oppression in South. The character of Aibileen is the character of mammy who works in white people house with full of loyalty in raising their children for her life time and lack of time to her own children” (NPR). From that statement, the black female character shows her life in pain as being black female who get oppression from white people.

The second black female stereotype film is *Diary of Mad Black Woman* (2005). The character of Helen McCarter (Kimberly Elise) is portrayed as a woman who does not have any access to power except through her husband Charles. She also asked her husband if there is something that she needs to change about her attitude or appearance to gain his affections. In this case, she represents “tragic mullato” because she portrayed as vicious and callous woman (*Diary of Mad Black Woman* 2005).

The study of woman stereotype had been conducted by Alfred M. Heartley. In his thesis, he argue that the “black female situation could be considered what Lisa Anderson and Judith Williams suggest of another stock Black female figure in circulation, the tragic mullato. The mullato is her lack of access to power and her essentially female position. Her racialized state puts her in a position that, in a racist culture, equals powerlessness” as cited in Heartley study (47). Moreover, skin color plays a crucial factor in the tragic mullato

circumstance as it does for Helen character. In the film version of the play, “although Helen is not light-skinned enough to “pass” for white as is the case with the stock mulatto stereotype, Helen is not portrayed by a dark skinned actress” (47). From that statement, it is concluded that Heartley found the woman stereotype in Tyler Perry work that describe black female is in pain and powerless.

Another film that explore black female horrible stereotype is *Precious* (2009) movie. It is one of African American work which presents the culture experience in Harlem in 1987. From the setting of *Precious* movie in Harlem, there is a historical context from black community as the voice women in color. According to Loretta J. Ross who is a national and international leader in movements for racial and economic justice and women’s rights in website, voice women in color sponsored the First National Conference on Women of Color and Reproductive Rights in Washington, D.C., which attracted over 400 women of color, two-thirds of whom were African Americans to promote the women’s right. No national organization of women of color working on reproductive rights existed at the time, and this conference was significant because it was the first conference in history that brought women from the feminist, civil rights, and Black Nationalist movements together to promote reproductive freedom as well as against racism, sexism, and poverty. From black feminist theory of reproductive freedom for Black women, they actually understanding of the role race, class, and gender have played in black female lives as their oppression (Trust Black Women). From the *Precious* movie, it is based on some of the difficulties in

black community and their family. The movie itself delivers the black female life in ghetto society as well as their voice in pain and oppression during the setting of the movie.

The film is about the bad relationship among daughter and mother as well as their horrific condition in their own society. As Halyard said in *World Socialist Web Site*, “the horrific conditions of poverty on the big screen and, instead of making any useful sense of them, the filmmakers present the most grotesque and offensive details but this is not the first time in history that artists and filmmakers have been confronted with dreadful circumstances. In world literature for at least the last century and a half (and, in the more recent period, filmmaking), the exposure of unbearable living conditions has played an important role” (Haryard). From the statement above, it can be inferred that the dreadful circumstances are the representation of black community itself. In *Precious* movie this dreadful circumstances also appear through the cruel relation between mother and daughter in dealing with their way of life in ghetto society.

The film was directed by Lee Daniel who is African American actor, film producer, and director. The writer chooses *Precious* because this is a cruel relation about mother and her daughter in black community as well as show a rare depiction in Hollywood movie from black point of view. Furthermore, this film also supported by well-known people, Oprah Winfrey and Tyler Perry who also have bad childhood experience and they become as executive producer of this film. *Precious* has received many achievement awards: *Sundance Film Festival* 2009 for the best drama, *Toronto International Film Festival* for People’s Choice

Award, *Cannes Film Festival 62nd* for official selection, *82nd Academy Award* for Best Picture, *Independent Spirit Awards (ISA) 2009* in the categories for Best Film, Best First Screenplay, Best Direction, Best Actress and Best Supporting Actress.

The main character Precious follows the life of Claireece “Precious” Jones, a teenage girl living in Harlem in New York City in the late 1980s, an obese, dark-skinned young Black woman whose life has been painful both physical and sexual abuse as she learns to read and write and begins to tell her story. She is kicked out of school when the administration knows she is pregnant for a second time, and told to attend an alternative school. Since she was child, Precious has been physically and verbally abused by her mother, raped repeatedly by her father, HIV positive got from her father, subjected to disrespect from classmates and treated cruelly in the neighborhood because of her weight. From her father sexual abuse, she has two children whom are products of incest. The first child, Monggo who suffers from Down syndrome was born when Precious still at school. Mary who is Precious mother does nothing. She only smoke, watch television, and collect welfare money. She also believes that education will not help Precious (Redmond).

The concept of black female character oppression in *Precious* movie leads them to the black female stereotype in their own society which actually shows the character in pain. From this perspective, black female informs the experience from their own community and developed into art through the regulation of media in the purpose to show what happen in African American woman life.

As interesting fact from Oprah Winfrey who also becomes as executive producer of *Precious* movie give a comment in *New York Times* on November 30th, 2009. According to her, “the movie tells the truth, the blindfolded that we do not want to uncover. The terrifying struggle for women and children in our society is countless. “*Precious*” story is one example that shows many issues that young girls are facing in our society today, whether it is through sexual abuse, poverty violence and failing in the education system. Furthermore, she thought this movie was a great way to create awareness, to empower and motivate those precious victimized girls that are experiencing these issues, because we will never know who this is happening to” (Winfrey). From this comment, the African American woman cruel life is still significance even though the setting of *Precious* movie is in 1980s but the truth depiction still appears and this racial issue should not be ignored and to be more aware that their society.

From that reason, people need to see those cruel depictions in African American women life. According Ruth Shays as cited in Collins’ book, a Black inner-city resident, describes how the standpoint of a subordinate group is discredited: “It will not kill people to hear the truth, but they do not like it and they would much rather hear it from one of their own than from a stranger” (70). From this statement, black female wants to give their voice in pain related to the stereotype even though the people who see the truth will claim that black female life is lack of manner and treated them as “other”. From such reason, the writer will analyze further the stereotype of black female as well as their oppression by Patricia Hill Collins’ in *Precious* movie by using *Black Feminist Thought* and qualitative method.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

Due to the background above, there is interesting questions about the representation of black female, specifically about the stereotype issue in *Precious* film. Therefore, the statements of the problems proposed for this research is:

1. How are African American women represented in the narrative and non-narrative aspects in Lee Daniel's *Precious* movie?

1.3 Objective of the Study

This study aims to reach an objective that is expected. The following objectives will be intended to answer the question mentioned in the statements of the problems. The objective is as following.

1. Revealing the representation of African American women delivered through the narrative and non-narrative in Lee Daniel's *Precious* movie.

1.4 Significance of the Study

By analyzing this film, the writer hopes that it will give some information to the world of knowledge generally and to the Cultural Studies particularly. Furthermore, this research is also expected to be a useful and helpful source for scholars, especially scholars in English in English Department Airlangga University who are interested to conduct similar studies. From this work, the writer wants to enrich the notion of African-American women racial problem and their oppression. The writer hopes by doing the analysis, it will increase the reader's understanding how the racial issues experience of black women characters is presented in the *Precious* movie. From the analysis of racial problem, the writer also hopes give a new breakthrough perspective toward

African American women. Through the African American women stereotype, it also challenges and criticizes the existence of stereotype toward black female. By seeing their own experience as marginal one in their own culture and life, it will give a new perspective of African American work. In this case, people will see the truth of African American women life because they experience the racism directly.

1.5 Definition of Key Terms

There are several terms used in this research that may not be familiar and is commonly used in our daily life. So the definitions of those terms are also provided here to help readers to understand the research.

1. *Racialism* : the belief in racial superiority, inferiority, and purity based on the conviction that moral and intellectual characteristics, just like physical characteristics, are biological properties that differentiate the races (Tyson 360).
2. *Matriarch* : “bad” black mother figure in Black homes with the character of overly aggressive, unfeminine women (Collins 75).
3. *Welfare mother* : women who refuse to work, but who dine on steak and stay home watching television all day long (Jordan 29).
4. “Others” : One such idea is binary thinking that categorizes people, things, and ideas in terms of their difference from one another (Collins 69).
5. *Oppression* : "The social act of placing severe restrictions on an individual, group or institution. Typically, a government or political

organization that is in power places these restrictions formally or covertly on oppressed groups so that they may be exploited and less able to compete with other social groups. The oppressed individual or group is devalued, exploited and deprived of privileges by the individual or group which has more power" (Barker 2003).

6. *Stereotype* : a fixed, over generalized belief about a particular group or class of people (Cardwell 1996).

