

## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

#### 1.1 Background of the study

Throughout history, black women have faced particular challenges that have been shaped by the confluence of their racial and gender identities. Black women have fought against injustice, prejudice, and marginalization from enslavement to the present day as well as for equality and justice in many other areas of life.

The topic of the thesis is the struggle of Black women in facing society, as depicted in three literary works - *The Pain Tree* by Olive Senior, *Sweat* by Zora Neale Hurston, and the reflection in *Hidden Figures* by Margot Lee Shetterly. The aim of this study is to analyze and explore the various forms of societal oppression and how Black women navigate these challenges in their daily lives, as portrayed in these works of literature.

Black women have long faced systemic discrimination and oppression in society, including racism, sexism, and economic disadvantage. These forms of oppression intersect and compound, resulting in unique and complex experiences for Black women that are often overlooked and misunderstood. Literature can provide insight into the experiences of Black women, as well as highlight the ways in which they navigate and resist societal oppression.

*The Pain Tree* by Olive Senior is an extraordinary collection of captivating short stories that provide an insightful glimpse into the lives of women named Larissa, black woman that work as a maid in a white family. Through the skillful storytelling of Olive Senior, readers are transported to a world where they can deeply empathize with the experiences and challenges faced by these resilient woman.

In Zora Neale Hurston's gripping short story *Sweat*, the narrative revolves around Delia, a strong-willed washerwoman who endures mistreatment and cruelty from her abusive husband. This poignant tale not only highlights the devastating consequences of domestic violence, but it also addresses the issue of racism, where Delia faces discrimination and prejudice based on her race. Additionally, the story delves into the complex theme of gender inequality, exposing the imbalance of power and the challenges faced by women in society.

Margot Lee Shetterly's illuminating work, *Hidden Figures*, chronicles the remarkable and previously untold story of a group of Black women who played pivotal roles as mathematicians at NASA during the intense space race of the 1960s. The book vividly explores the adverse effects of racism, illustrating how these brilliant women faced discrimination and marginalization based on their skin color. It also touches upon the theme of sexism, highlighting the uphill battle they fought to gain recognition and respect in a male-dominated field.

As a literature student, I find it fascinating how authors utilize their writing to examine social concerns and the human condition. I'm curious to find out how these literary works provide a deep and complicated perspective of the realities of Black women because the representation of Black women in literature has frequently been constrained and stereotyped. The objective of my work is to improve knowledge of the intersectional realities of Black women in society by dissecting the various coping mechanisms and methods depicted in these works.

## 1.2 Identification of problem

The topic of Black women's struggles in society is a complicated and diverse one that is highlighted in a variety of literary works and real-life accounts. The shared topic throughout the literary works *The Pain Tree* by Olive Senior and *Sweat* by Zora Neale Hurston, as well as the nonfiction book *Hidden Figures* by Margot Lee Shetterly, is the experiences of Black women who face prejudice, marginalization, and other forms of systemic oppression.

The issue that arises from this subject is the enduring and widespread nature of these problems, which limit Black women's capacity to reach their full potential in a variety of spheres of their existence. Black women encounter a number of obstacles when trying to get a good education, find employment, and get treated fairly in society. These problems are a result of societal institutions that have existed for a while now and which still discriminate against Black women.

Additionally, this issue includes the challenges Black women have in overcoming such obstacles and establishing themselves in society. Although they have encountered many obstacles, Black women have shown resiliency and determination in their efforts for achievement and growth. But in addition to aggravating the problem, this fight can have a substantial negative impact on their mental and emotional health.

### **1.3 Review on related literature**

In Peggy McIntosh's seminal article titled "Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack: The Invisibility of White Privilege and Its Consequences," published in 2003, she presents a challenging analysis of the idea of white privilege and illuminates its broad repercussions for marginalized communities. Her work effectively highlights the institutional and systemic systems that continue to make Black women's difficulties invisible, even though it does not expressly focus on their experiences. McIntosh urges readers to understand the necessity of recognizing and actively tackling the unique issues encountered by Black women in society by digging into the complex systems of privilege and power.

McIntosh's examination of white privilege acts as a starting point for more extensive discussions of racial inequity. She metaphorically uncovers the unacknowledged advantages and benefits that white people frequently have but are unaware of by unpacking the invisible backpack. Her article persuasively makes the case that the normalization of these advantages helps to maintain inequality since

they give white people undeserved benefits while simultaneously disadvantageous underrepresented communities.

In her pioneering work *Breaking the Silence: Black Women, Domestic Violence, and the Church*, written by Traci C. West and released in 2008, she gives a thorough examination of the intersections between domestic abuse, religion, and the particular experiences of Black women. Through her analysis, West highlights the important role that the church plays in helping or failing to help Black women who experience domestic violence. By concentrating on this topic in particular, the piece powerfully emphasizes the critical need for extensive support networks that address the unique difficulties faced by Black women in abusive relationships.

The article clarifies how the church, a key institution in many Black communities, plays a part in this environment. In her book, West examines how cultural beliefs, religious practices, and cultural teachings can either empower or confine Black women who are victims of domestic abuse. While the church has the potential to provide consolation, direction, and social support, it can also help to maintain harmful ideas and customs that keep victims silent, hold them accountable for the abuse, or put the sanctity of marriage above the security and well-being of survivors.

Next, in Fatimah Williams Castro's insightful article titled *Intersectionality and Resilience: Black Women's Endurance in the Face of Adversity*, published in 2015, she provides a deep exploration of the concept of intersectionality and its profound

impact on the lives of Black women. Castro's work delves into how Black women develop resilience as they confront and navigate the intersecting challenges of racism and sexism. In addition to analyzing the resilience of Black women, Castro's article raises awareness of the need for social and political change. She argues that resilience should not be misconstrued as an excuse for societal complacency or a justification for the perpetuation of oppressive systems. Instead, she contends that true resilience involves challenging and transforming the structures that perpetuate inequality and discrimination. The article calls for a commitment to dismantling racism, sexism, and other forms of oppression in order to create a more just and equitable society for Black women and other marginalized communities. It is important to recognize that since the publication of Castro's article, discussions surrounding intersectionality and resilience have continued to evolve. Ongoing research and advocacy have deepened our understanding of the nuanced experiences of Black women and the broader range of social identities and systemic oppressions they may navigate. It is crucial to continually engage with and amplify the voices and experiences of Black women, as well as to center their perspectives in discussions of resilience, intersectionality, and social change.

In the impactful article titled *Black Girls Matter: Pushed Out, Overpoliced, and Underprotected*, co-authored by Kimberlé Crenshaw and Kimberlé W. Crenshaw in 2015, an essential exploration of the experiences of Black girls within the education system is presented. By bringing attention to these pressing issues, the authors

emphasize the critical importance of creating inclusive and supportive educational environments that value and uplift the experiences of Black girls. The article illuminates the consequences of such biased disciplinary practices on the educational trajectories and well-being of Black girls. It discusses how punitive measures, such as suspensions, expulsions, and involvement with law enforcement, can disrupt their academic progress, contribute to a sense of disengagement, and exacerbate the school-to-prison pipeline. Crenshaw and Crenshaw emphasize the urgency of addressing these issues to ensure that Black girls are provided with the supportive environments they need to thrive academically, emotionally, and socially.

Otherwise, in Julia S. Jordan-Zachery's thought-provoking article titled *The Politics of Respectability and the Social Context of Black Women's Activism*, published in 2018, a comprehensive exploration of the challenges faced by Black women activists is presented. This article delves into the historical and contemporary contexts in which Black women have engaged in activism, examining the influence of the politics of respectability on their experiences. By analyzing the intersection of respectability politics and Black women's activism, the article highlights the agency and resilience of Black women as they challenge societal norms and advocate for their rights.

Jordan-Zachery's article situates Black women's activism within a broader socio-historical context, acknowledging the unique challenges they have faced throughout history. It examines how societal expectations of respectability, often rooted in racial

and gendered stereotypes, have shaped and constrained the ways in which Black women activists are perceived and allowed to participate in the public sphere. The politics of respectability has historically imposed expectations on Black women to conform to white, middle-class standards of behavior and appearance, placing limitations on their activism and demanding adherence to narrow ideals of propriety.

The article *Survivors of Corporate Downsizing: The Communication Challenge* focuses mostly on communication-focused solutions for those who have survived downsizing or restructuring. Even if the essay sheds light on these people's struggles, it does not adequately address the negative effects of poor communication during organizational changes, such as workplace violence. The article misses an opportunity to explore a critical part of the survivor experience by inadequately addressing the possibility of workplace violence brought on by downsizing or restructuring initiatives. It's crucial for managing and minimizing potential hazards to comprehend the connection between workplace violence, employee views, and business change. It would have been helpful for the essay to mention the significance of establishing a secure and encouraging work environment during times of organizational transformation in order to solve this issue. Fostering a culture of trust and respect, being transparent and timely in communication, and giving employees accurate information are all essential tactics that can help to diffuse conflict and reduce the likelihood of violence.



### 1.4 Research Questions

1. What are the specific challenge faced by black women in society, as highlight in *The Pain Tree* by olive senior and *Sweat* by Zora Neale Hurston?
2. What is the role of black feminism from the two short stories?
3. How does the two short stories related to *Hidden Figures* book?

### 1.5 Scope of the research

The scope of the research for this topic would be to explore the struggles that Black women face in society as depicted in the literary works *The Pain Tree* by Olive Senior and *Sweat* by Zora Neale Hurston, as well as in the real-life experiences of Black women portrayed in the non-fiction book *Hidden Figures* by Margot Lee Shetterly.

The research could delve into various themes and issues affecting Black women, such as racism, sexism, discrimination, and social injustice. It could also examine the ways in which Black women have historically been marginalized and excluded from positions of power and influence in society.

Moreover, the research could explore the different coping mechanisms employed by Black women in the face of adversity, such as resilience, strength, and determination. It could also examine the importance of community and support networks in helping Black women navigate and overcome the challenges they face.

Overall, the scope of the research would be to provide a comprehensive understanding of the experiences and struggles of Black women in society, as depicted in literature and real-life examples, and to highlight the importance of recognizing and addressing the issues they face.

### 1.6 Objective of the research

The objective of the study is to evaluate and analyze how Black women are portrayed and their experiences in society as they are presented in the nonfiction book *Hidden Figures* by Margot Lee Shetterly, the fiction books *The Pain Tree* by Olive Senior and *Sweat* by Zora Neale Hurston. Finding the social, cultural, and historical framework that influences Black women's experiences in society may be one of the study's primary goals. Analyzing how the hardships encountered by Black women in society are reflected in the real-life experiences of the Black women in *Hidden Figures* recognizing the coping strategies used by Black women in the face of adversity and how they relate to the themes and concerns discussed in the literary works and in real-life events. Highlighting the importance of recognizing and addressing the issues faced by Black women in society and the ways in which they can be supported and empowered. Overall, the objective of the study would be to provide a deeper understanding of the experiences of Black women in society and to promote awareness and advocacy for their rights and well-being.