

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background of the Research

Literature is more than a form of artistic expression it is a social document that reflects and critiques the realities of a particular era. In American literature, issues such as racial inequality, gender oppression, and structural violence often appear as recurring themes, especially in works produced by or about marginalized communities. One of the most persistent and destructive social realities depicted in American literature is racial discrimination, particularly as it intersects with gender-based oppression. (Fredrickson, p.1).

Literature serves not only as a means of entertainment, but also as a medium for representing social reality. In this sense, literary works can serve as symbolic spaces where experiences, identities, and power relations within society are constructed and communicated. In the context of African American literature, particularly works written by Black women, literature becomes an essential tool for voicing marginalized experiences, including the complex experiences of racial and gender discrimination.

Racial discrimination is a part of American history and can be seen in American literature in many areas of life. Moreover, since the beginning of the nation, racism has been an important topic in a variety of works. Racial discrimination is the act of treating someone differently based on their race. If someone is not aware of or awareness views that devalue them because of their race, they may be engaging in racial discrimination. According to Blank, Dabady, and Citr o's book *Measuring Racial Discrimination*, racial

discrimination happens when someone is denied equal chances or receives less favorable treatment because of their race (2004, p.55).

According to sociology, a social judgment that is something that is personal as an explanation of racial discrimination in society. However, it is a more general social and economic problem that focuses on a part of humanity. In order racial discrimination is no longer an issue of personal choice. However, it is a bigger social and economic problem.

Racial discrimination against Black people has a long history in American culture. Since the beginning of American history, white dislike has targeted Black people. White societies have categorized black Americans as racially apart for millennia based on physical characteristics such as skin color and hair type that are believed to be unchanging, according to Feagin and Vera's book *White Racism: The Basics* (1995, p.114). This argument shows how common racial discrimination is in America. This suggests that racial discrimination continued for a long time, mostly because of the Jim Crow Law.

Jim Crow separated whites and blacks, giving whites greater advantages in life. But in 1960, the Civil Rights Movement fought for a legal ban on this type of racial discrimination. But Black Americans continue to face racial discrimination. The Black American community continues to face the same injustices and struggles that have always existed.

Black women in America experienced several sorts of oppression at the beginning of the 20th century. White society discriminated against them based on race,



and the Black community itself discriminated against them based on gender. Due to this stance, Black women were frequently marginalized and hardly ever had a platform to express their views (hooks 15). In light of this, literature serves as a crucial platform for showcasing black women's voices and chronicling their fight against systemic injustice.

"The belief that race is the primary determinant of human traits and capacities and that racial differences produce an inherent superiority of a particular race" (1) is George M. Fredrickson's definition of racial prejudice. Racist social structures, in which members of particular groups particularly Black people are routinely labeled as inferior and subjected to unequal treatment, are founded on this concept.

Racial discrimination is a socially organized form of prejudice, according to sociology. According to the quotation, "A negative attitude toward a whole group of people, like racial or ethnic minorities, is called prejudice." The denial of equal rights and opportunities to individuals and groups due to bias or other capricious reasons is known as discrimination. Group-based and culturally inherited, this bias creates an injustice system that impacts not just individuals but the entire social structure (Schaefer 212). Racial prejudice against the Black community in American society is internalized by the Black community itself as well as externalized by the white majority. In other words, limiting norms and values also serve to reproduce racist social systems in vulnerable areas.

The feminist elements of this work have been emphasized in numerous studies, but there is also a significant element of racial prejudice. Zora Neale Hurston's 1937

novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God* presents a literary critique of this intersectional oppression through the story of Janie Crawford, a Black woman navigating a racist and patriarchal society in the American South. Hurston's portrayal of Janie is not just a personal journey, but a representation of broader social realities how systemic racism, generational trauma, and gendered expectations restrict Black women's autonomy and identity. In the book, the black community is presented as one that is still shaped by colonial ideals, where honor and power are still connected to being close to white ideals.

Hurston, an anthropologist and member of the Harlem Renaissance, employs a sociocultural method in her writing to illustrate how black women face discrimination from both their own community and white culture. "Hurston dramatizes the black woman's yearning for autonomy within and against a racially stratified and patriarchal society," according to Valerie Smith (Smith 1983). This implies that a combination of gender and racial discrimination makes black women's challenges learnt (Crenshaw 1989).

This study will demonstrate how literary writings both reflect and shape social reality using the sociology of literature approach. According to Alan Swingewood, literature is a social product that reflects the prevailing ideologies of the society in which it was created (Swingewood, 1972). As a result, this book offers a valuable platform for examining how black women are discriminated against and how the protagonist attempts to exercise agency in a system that oppresses them.

In Hurston's book, black men who see women as objects to maintain their position of power in a patriarchal system also discriminate against them. "Hurston's work reveals the internalization of white supremacist and patriarchal values among black men, resulting in the perpetuation of black women's subordination," according to research by Cheryl A. Wall (Wall, 1995). Black women's attempts to forge their own identities in the face of intricate societal and cultural influences are thus reflected in Janie's portrayal.

The novel's representation of racial discrimination against Black women is the main topic of this study. The novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937) by Zora Neale Hurston is a work of literature that represents the experiences of black women in the United States in the early 20th century. Through the character of Janie Crawford, Hurston describes how black women had to face various forms of oppression from white society, black men, and other women. This study does not treat Janie as an object of intrinsic analysis alone, but rather as a social representation created by Hurston to voice the real conditions of black women at that time.

This study uses a mimetic approach as a supporting tool in literary analysis, aiming to reveal how authors construct specific representations of social reality through the creation of characters, plots, symbols, and narratives. In this case, the mimetic approach focuses on the meaning formed by the text on certain social issues rather than on the elements of the work as the main object. Thus, the intrinsic elements in the novel are used only as data to show how Hurston represents the social reality of black women who experience both racial and gender discrimination at the same time.

This approach is important because *Their Eyes Were Watching God* was written in a social context full of inequality. By analyzing how Hurston created her representation of black women through the character of Janie, this study hopes to provide a deeper understanding of how fiction can be both a reflection and a critique of oppressive social structures.

1.2 Identification of the Problem

Zora Neale Hurston, the author of this book, was a Black American who also opposed racism in America. She described the social circumstances of the black population in America using literature as a medium. This study focuses on the issue of racial discrimination experienced specifically by black women, who must face the double impact of racism and patriarchy. Hurston's novel is represented as a tool to understand how literature captures and challenges these structures of oppression. The issues discussed are not limited to character conflicts or romantic plots, but rather the systemic forces that underlie the marginalization of women like Janie Crawford. These include colorism, class inequality, generational trauma, and the internalization of colonial values within the Black community itself.

This kind of prejudice, particularly against Black people, has long existed in the United States. "The belief that race is the primary determinant of human traits and capacities and that racial differences produce an inherent superiority of a particular race" is what George M. Fredrickson defines as racism (Fredrickson 1). This assertion demonstrates that racism is a belief system that bases an unequal social hierarchy on race rather than just being an antagonistic attitude or action toward another group.

Because they are oppressed both as women and as Black people, Black women are subjected to a more severe kind of prejudice. "Black women are doubly victimized in a racist, sexist society because they are Black and female," according to Bell Hooks (hooks 15). This assertion emphasizes how black women encounter many types of racial and gender-based oppression, which distinguishes their experiences from those of white women or black males. It is impossible to comprehend the discrimination people experience solely through the prisms of racism or sexism since it is multifaceted and intersects.

As a black American writer, Hurston's work *Their Eyes Were Watching God* demonstrates her efforts to confront the experiences of black women in the American South in the early 20th century, especially in light of racial, gender, and class discrimination in the country.

As Zora Neale Hurston portrays black American women experiencing a lot of racial discrimination such as sexual harassment, enslavement, patriarchy, and injustice in society, the real problem is how these connecting oppressions silence their voices, shut down their freedom, and make it more difficult for them to find their identities. Hurston's use of female characters to represent, especially Janie Crawford, to highlight and critique complex social structures that support gender and racial inequality in both black and white communities is examined in this thesis.

1.3 Review of Related Studies

Cheryl A. Wall's *Women of the Harlem Renaissance* (1995), which analyzes the different kinds of discrimination Black women experience in both their own communities and in a society ruled by white people, is one of the important academic works that improves the analysis in this study. Prior research has recognized Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* as a significant feminist and racial text. Cheryl A. Wall (1995) argues that Hurston exposes "the multiple layers of oppression that Black women face not only from white society but from Black men as well." (Wall 89). from Wall's perspective, Janie's journey serves as an example of the struggles experienced by Black women who must deal with discrimination from both the patriarchal Black community and dominant white structures. Since both view literature as a mirror of social conditions and a means of identifying inequality for change, this is in perfect agreement with the sociology of literature method applied to this study. This study additionally shows the advantage of using an intersectional framework to the analysis of literary works by and about Black women by looking at Janie's struggle and personal growth within this conflicting discrimination.

Patricia Hill Collins' *Black Feminist Thought* (2000) is another important book that is relevant to our research. introduces the concept of interlocking systems of oppression, asserting that race, gender, and class interact to reinforce structural domination. Collins presents the idea of "interconnection," showing the fact that racism, sexism, and classism support one another rather than acting independently. She says that "Black women's oppression cannot be understood in isolation from one

another, but rather as intersecting systems of domination” (Collins 18). This theoretical framework plays an important part in acknowledging Black women as persons discussing multiple forms of structural violence, rather than just as victims of one type of discrimination. A greater understanding of Janie Crawford's experiences in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* is made possible by using of Collins' intersecting sensor, especially with regard to the racial discrimination she faces from both white society and her own Black community, which remains stuck in patriarchal ideology and social inequality. This method supports critical discussions on identity, power, and struggle while improving our understanding of how literature represents complex social realities.

The 1992 book *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* by Toni Morrison presents an important examination of the ways in which Black characters have traditionally been ignored in American literature to create and validate white identity. According to Morrison, Black characters are often shown as symbolic or dehumanized people who help maintain the power of white protagonists rather than independent beings. She notes, “American literature is free of blacks and is uniquely American because of that” (Morrison 5), showing how Black characters are specifically ignored or stereotyped to support white cultural narratives. Morrison's theory is especially relevant to the study of Black women characters, who experience double discrimination because of their gender and race, even though her focus is on how Blackness is generally portrayed in American literature. understanding how literary works, such as *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, both reflect and oppose the systemic

powers of racism and patriarchy needs a comprehension of this framework. By presenting a fully created Black female character who challenges standard narratives of erasing and objectivity, Hurston's portrayal of Janie Crawford might be seen via Morrison's viewpoint as an intentional show of literary opposition.

Kimberlé Crenshaw's influential theory of intersectionality, first introduced in her 1991 article "*Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color*," directly informs this study by emphasizing that Black women's experiences must be understood as a unique convergence of multiple axes of inequality. Crenshaw believes that because Black women sit at the crossroads of multiple repressive frameworks, such as racism and sexism, they have been especially enslaved. She writes, "Any analysis that does not take intersectionality into account cannot sufficiently address the particular manner in which Black women are subordinated due to the fact that the intersectional experience is greater than the sum of racism and sexism" (Crenshaw 1244). This theoretical framework is especially important for analyzing literary representations of Black women, like Janie Crawford in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, whose experiences are affected not by one but by crossing forms of discrimination. Crenshaw shows how both legal and social systems usually fail to identify the specific nature of discrimination faced by women of color, causing their struggles undetectable. According to Crenshaw, literature can be analyzed not only as a reflection of social realities but also as a space where the combined effects of race and gender are made clear and available to critique.

Barbara Christian presents a powerful critique of dominant Western theoretical frameworks sometimes ignore or confuse the lived experiences of Black women in her famous 1987 essay "*The Race for Theory*." Black women's voices and experiences create the foundation for Christian's more experiential and contextual approach to the analysis of literature. Black scholars and subjects are excluded from the creation of literary theory, as she shows in her famous statement, "For people of color theory has become a commodity which we consume but do not produce" (Christian 54). She argues that because of this missing element, interpretations fail to sufficiently represent the complexity of Black women's lives. Christian's viewpoint is very similar to the sociology of literature method used for this research, which places a strong focus on understanding literary works by looking at their historical and social settings. A more thorough examination of the racial and gender-based oppression that Janie and other Black female characters faced is made possible by using this structure to *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Christian's findings show the value of using analytical techniques that take note of Black women's cultural realities and lived experiences rather than adopting theoretical frameworks that might hide them.

Bell Hooks examines the historical and structural disenfranchisement of Black women in both the white-dominated feminist organizations and the Black male-led civil rights movement in her classic written work *Ain't I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism* (1981). She argues that "White women's liberationists were not eager to discuss racism nor were they willing to acknowledge the specific oppression of Black women" (hooks 14), highlighting how white feminism often failed to address the

compounded struggles of women of color. Hooks introduces the concept of double marginalization, where Black women are oppressed simultaneously by racism and sexism two forces that reinforce one another. This critical insight is deeply relevant to the analysis of Janie Crawford in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, a character who endures the intersecting effects of white supremacy and patriarchal domination within her own Black community. Hooks' work provides a foundational understanding of structural prejudice and directly supports the intersectional and sociological approach employed in this study. Her perspective helps illuminate the complex social realities that shape Black women's identities and lived experiences in literature.

1.4 Research Question

This research will answer the questions:

1. What social realities are represented through the character of Janie Crawford as a black woman in the early 20th century?
2. How does Zora Neale Hurston depict these realities in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* by using intrinsic elements as supporting elements?

1.5 Scope of The Study

This study focuses on the representation of black women through the character of Janie Crawford. The analysis combines mimetic theory and a sociological approach to literature. Intrinsic elements such as characters, symbols, and dialogue are used only as supporting data to explain the social reality of the period in which the novel is set.

This study does not discuss in depth other intrinsic elements such as plot, language style, symbolism, or the theme of love, unless they are directly related to the theme of

racial discrimination. In addition, this study also does not discuss gender issues or feminism as the main study, unless it is closely related to the racial problems faced by female characters in the novel.

1.6 Objective of the Study

There are two categories of objects used in this study: formal and material objects. The 1937 book *Their Eyes Were Watching God* by Zora Neale Hurston serves as the tangible subject of this study. The primary source for examining how racial prejudice against Black women is portrayed in the story's characters, settings, and conflicts is this book.

Black women's experiences with racial discrimination, particularly in the setting of early 20th-century American society, are the formal object of this study. Using a literary sociology approach which views literary works as a representation of the social and cultural environment in which they were created, this study looks at how certain types of racial discrimination are mirrored in literary works.

