

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background of the Study

Women, as individuals, have faced structural barriers that have challenged their ability to freely access quality education, decent employment, and other forms of social equality. Feminists have championed the issue of inequality for decades, but it remains a primary issue in social studies. Social issues such as those affecting gender identity cannot be viewed from a single perspective, they require consideration of other social factors, such as race, culture, and class. The incorporation of social aspects is a factor that makes the experiences faced by women more layered and complex, thus requiring a more in-depth analysis that also takes into account aspects of gender and other social categories.

According to Scott (1986), gender refers to the socially constructed roles, attitudes, and characteristics that are seen as suitable for men and women in a particular community. Gender highlights how cultural norms and structures influence identity and power dynamics, while biological factors determine sex. In addition to acting as an identifier, gender functions as a structural mechanism that regulates social hierarchy and access to resources in society. The influence of ideas about femininity, masculinity, and power dynamics will be presented through the analysis of literary texts. These elements play an important role in understanding gender aspects as part of social construction.

Not only gender, social class plays an important role in shaping women's social experiences. Social class refers to an individual's position in the economic hierarchy, especially in the control of resources, labor, and capital (Wright, 1997). Class has an important influence on how individuals organize society and determine access to social

services, such as health, education, and employment opportunities. This is further reinforced by the view (Bourdieu, 1986) that access to education, employment, and social mobility is influenced by socio-economic status, such as women from wealthy families facing fewer structural barriers than women from low-income backgrounds. The scholar's view above also shows that there is continuity between gender and class which influences the power that women have to negotiate with the power system. This is also in line with Crenshaw's (1989) argument that an exclusive understanding of women's issues can arise not only from gender aspects but also from ignoring economic differences, as understood in feminist discourse.

Social class is not only related to determining material wealth but also becomes a basic determinant of the formation of culture and society. Social class shapes how individuals think and the form of treatment received from academic and professional environments. According to the view (Bourdieu, 1986) that women who come from lower-class groups often face structural challenges, such as social bias and limited access to education. On the other hand, women from upper-class backgrounds have the advantage of overcoming these obstacles and becoming a factor in their success in fighting these challenges. This also proves that social class is an advantage that benefits certain parties and does not achieve equality, especially for women. The relevance of these issues is an important aspect, especially in feminist studies, which emphasize that privilege must be examined and its relationship to gender equality.

Issues around gender and social class also provide new space for society's perspectives and create gender and class intersections. The relationship between gender and class presents a layered and interacting system where the concept of intersectionality emerges. Initially, this concept was introduced by Kimberlé Crenshaw

(1989) to describe how various aspects related to social identity, such as gender, race, and class, intersect to create forms of intersectionality. These social structures are present, intersect, and create forms of injustice that cannot be studied if only looking at one aspect of identity. In this context, women not only experience gender discrimination but can also experience inequality influenced by their economic status. Therefore, the need to understand intersectionality is to enable society to see how structural inequality emerges and occurs through the complex interaction of various forms of social identity.

The intersectionality of gender and class is important to study in both popular culture and literature. These intersecting aspects of identity influence how women are viewed and represented socially. Women from the upper class may have a high percentage of access to education and social connections to challenge gender stereotypes. Still, lower-class women often do not have the opportunity to gain the same access. Representing these issues in literary works is a good step to strengthen or challenge the understanding of how inequality and disparities are presented by society, especially for women. One of Amanda Brown's works, *Legally Blonde* (2001), is one of the right literary works to be a medium for analyzing this issue. This work tells the story of a young woman's journey in facing challenges against social stereotypes and having advantages as part of the upper class.

Legally Blonde tells the story of a young woman named Elle Woods. She is a beautiful, rich, and stylish woman initially labeled as a "dumb blonde" by her environment. The journey begins when her ex-lover ends the relationship because Elle is considered not "serious". Elle enters Stanford Law School to prove she can be owned again. However, on her journey, Elle proves that she can be a woman who is superior in intelligence and worthy in the world of law. Throughout her journey, Elle experiences

various gender-based discrimination, but the success she has achieved is inseparable from the role of social status as part of the upper class. She was able to access elite education, material resources, and social networks that women from lower-class backgrounds might not easily obtain. However, her journey also showed losses, proving that being an upper-class woman is not a guarantee of always getting convenience in society. Therefore, this narrative is an open space to see how gender and class interact and how their privileges influence the formation of one's experience of feminism.

Rooted through mapping the background of the problem above, this study aims to analyze how the intersectionality of gender and class is represented in the novel *Legally Blonde* and to what extent that privilege brings Elle Woods to her empowerment as a woman. Through Kimberlé Crenshaw's intersectionality theory and Stuart Hall's representation theory, this study will examine whether the feminist narrative of this literary work can present an inclusive narrative or reinforce biased representations of women from certain circles.

The study of gender and class intersectionality has become urgent and requires in-depth discussion. This is due to the increasingly complex issues and increased awareness of societal structural inequality. In various cases, women's empowerment can only be seen in certain circles, especially those with access to a good economy and quality education. Therefore, literature, which reflects social reality, is an important medium for forming understanding and presenting criticism of how inequality is represented and maintained. The study conducted on the novel *Legally Blonde* is expected to contribute to the critique of feminist narratives, especially in terms of intersectionality science. By highlighting how the story goes in finding empowerment

differences so that it can show whether there is inclusivity if it does not consider the complexity of social identity itself.

1.2 Identification of Problems

Although the novel focuses on progressive feminist themes, *Legally Blonde* presents a storyline that focuses on the empowerment of its upper-class main character. Elle Woods, while successfully defying gender stereotypes and proving her legal acumen, does so through the advantages of her socioeconomic status, such as access to an elite education, financial stability, and social capital. Her privileges give her access to navigate and overcome obstacles that would be difficult for lower-class women to overcome. This suggests that *Legally Blonde* depicts a selective empowerment storyline, emphasizing individual resilience while ignoring the structural barriers that many women face. This raises the critical question of whether there is inclusivity to its feminist message and how the forms of success depicted in the novel can be felt universally by all women.

One of the main issues with discussing this work is the narrative's limitations on the issue of intersectionality, especially gender and class. Although the novel presents the problem of gender-based discrimination, it shows it through the eyes of a wealthy white woman. It is interesting to discuss how the obstacles she experiences are due to the intersection of gender and class. Elle Woods' journey visualizes the goal of the liberal feminist concept, where women prioritize independence and personal achievement. By applying Kimberle Crenshaw's Intersectionality Theory, Stuart Hall's Representation Theory, and Liberal Feminism Theory, this study examines how *Legally Blonde* shows the intersection of gender and class in feminist literature and how the intersection impacts her journey toward empowerment. This study will examine whether the novel

reinforces the dominant narrative that supports the experiences of privileged women and ultimately questions the extent to which the depiction of empowerment contributes to a more inclusive and intersectional understanding of feminism.

1.3 The Review of Previous Studies

To provide a deeper understanding of conducting this study, it is crucial to review previous studies related to gender, class, and intersectionality. The nine studies below are the primary foundation for providing a theoretical and contextual framework for the intersectionality issues in the novel *Legally Blonde*.

The first relevant study is “The Stereotypes of the Main Character in Amanda Brown’s *Legally Blonde*” by Lestari (2021). The study focuses on the stereotypes attached to Elle Woods, especially gender, physical characteristics, occupation, and socioeconomic status. Using a feminist and psychological approach, this study aims to show how Elle challenges negative stereotypes against women in academic and professional environments. The results of the study show that the novel presents stereotypes in various forms, ranging from gender, physical characteristics, occupation, and socioeconomic status. Elle shows that she is a character who can fight misunderstandings. However, this study is minimal in studying how Elle's social class shapes her empowerment.

The second study, “Challenging the ‘Dumb Blonde’ Stereotype: A Feminist and Intersectional Analysis of Gender and Professionalism in *Legally Blonde* (2001) Movie” by Lee et al. (2024). This study uses feminist critical theory, gender performativity, and intersectionality theory to examine the transformation of Elle Woods' character from being underestimated to becoming a successful lawyer. It shows that this film challenges society's expectations that femininity is identical to a lack of intelligence.

This study contributes to current research in two ways. First, it significantly supports the exploration of how the concept of intersectionality as a theoretical framework for exploring the interconnectedness of gender and class in literary texts. Second, it provides a comparison of two different contexts. In this case, Lee et al. emphasize the challenge of the "dumb blonde" stereotype in the film version of *Legally Blonde*. On the other hand, this thesis focuses on a female character with privilege and an upper-class background, namely Elle Woods from the novel *Legally Blonde*, which is the text version of this story. In addition, other differences can be seen from the use of Stuart Hall's representation theory in this latest research. This theory aims to open up new perspectives on the representation of the concept of empowerment, shaped by experiences of intersectionality between gender and class.

The third study, "The Representation of Blonde Girl Through Elle Woods as the Major Character in the Film *Legally Blonde*" by Citraminarti (2009), The study aims to investigate how *Legally Blonde* interacts with the stereotype of the "dumb blonde." Using representation theory, this study argues that Elle Woods challenges this stereotype by demonstrating resilience, determination, and intelligence. This study contributes to a deeper understanding of how gender is portrayed in films. However, it does not address how gender and class interact and intersect, leaving a gap that can be filled through future research.

The fourth study, "Intersectionality of Gender and Race in Rebecca Hall's *Passing*" by Salma Nur (2022). This thesis examines the intersection of racial and gender inequality in the film *Passing* (2021), which emphasizes the experiences of black women. Nur highlights the structural, political, and representational marginalization experienced by the protagonist Irene Redfield and uses Kimberlé

Crenshaw's Intersectionality Theory and Boggs & Petrie's characterization framework to examine how these aspects intersect. This study also delves into the theoretical framework of research using Intersectionality Theory. However, the study focuses solely on aspects of racial and gender inequality, particularly among Black women. Thus, this research highlights the gap in how gender and class issues intersect among women from the upper class.

The fifth study, "Intersectionality of Race, Gender, and Class in Sherri L. Smith's *Flygirl*" by Annisa (2023). The study examines issues of identity in the 1940s, focusing on the experiences of the main character, Ida, who uses the practice of "racial passing" to realize her dream of becoming a pilot. Through discourse analysis and Stuart Hall's theory of representation, this study reveals the complexity of intersectional identity and resistance to systemic injustice during the Jim Crow era. This study provides insight into analyzing *Legally Blonde* from a gender and class perspective, although it makes race a significant component of the causes of oppression.

The sixth study, "Gender, Race, and Identity: An Intersectional Analysis of Elhillo's *Home Is Not a Country*" by Nasir et al. (2024). This study analyzes how gender, race, and identity are interrelated in Safia Elhillo's *Home Is Not a Country* novel. The study uses intersectionality theory to investigate the life experiences of the main character, which are present due to the influence of various identities, and to further explore the experiences of oppression faced by the protagonist focusing on race, gender, and other forms of immigration and financial barriers that shape the hero's subjectivity. This study offers a theoretical framework for using intersectionality theory in the intersection of multiple identities. However, it focuses more on the impact of racial identity as the primary focus.

The seventh study is “Intersectionality of Race and Gender in ‘Harry Potter: The Deathly Hallows’” by Utami (2021). This study analyzes the intersection of gender and class in the *Harry Potter* novels, specifically the character of Hermione Granger. It examines how dominant narratives support or challenge the marginalization that intersections bring. However, this study also focuses on racial identity as the primary research instrument.

The eighth study, “Intersectional Experiences of Rural Women: Analyzing the Impact of Gender and Class in Aysha Baqir’s *Beyond the Fields*” by Anwer and Chaudhary (2024). The study examines the intersection of gender and class that impacts women's experiences living in rural areas. It presents a broader understanding of the disadvantages experienced by women from lower-class backgrounds, in contrast to *Legally Blonde*, who come from upper-class backgrounds. This study helps to see how significant differences in experience shape the storylines of finding their respective empowerments.

The ninth study, “Women’s Representation in *The Devil Wears Prada*” by Natih (2024). The study uses a feminist perspective to analyze how gender is portrayed in *The Devil Wears Prada*. The study supported by Simone de Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex* theory and Judith Butler’s *Gender Performativity* study sheds insight on gendered workplace expectations by highlighting how female ambition and power relations are portrayed in professional contexts. Because this study provides a comparative framework for analyzing class privilege in professional settings in feminist literature, it is relevant to current studies.

These nine studies will certainly present an objective reference for understanding intersectional themes more deeply and analyzing *Legally Blonde* at a more complex

level. This study seeks to provide a more varied critique of Amanda Brown's published work and its position as modern feminist writing and interact with previous research on representation, gender, and class privilege.

1.4 Research Questions

1. What forms of gender and class intersectionality does Elle Woods face in *Legally Blonde*?
2. How does Elle Woods respond to the intersection of gender and class in her journey towards empowerment?

1.5 The Scope of the Research

This study focuses on the intersectionality of gender and class in the character of Elle Woods in Amanda Brown's *Legally Blonde*. This study aims to see how Elle Woods' background plays a role in shaping her empowerment story. In addition, this study will see whether the novel presents an inclusive feminist message or strengthens the perspective on privilege by analyzing gender and class factors in Elle's journey.

1.6 The Objective of the Research

The objectives are arranged based on the problem of the study. This research tries to find out the answer to those questions; these are:

1. To analyze how *Legally Blonde* depicts the intersection of gender and class experienced by its female protagonist.
2. To assess whether the novel offers an inclusive feminist message or perpetuates a privileged-centered view in the protagonist's journey to find her empowerment.