

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1. Background of the Problem

Deeply embedded in cultural, political, and economic structures, racism remains one of the most persistent and complex social issues in modern society. There is a growing concern that racism has begun operating in economic and business frameworks, which indicates traditional discussions of racism that often surrounds topics such as social injustice, discrimination, and inequality no longer fully applies in the modern society. Racial identity can influence market dynamics, consumer behaviour, production decisions, and the evaluation of cultural products in contemporary capitalist societies. Racial stereotypes and expectations have not only been reproduced as entertainment, but, this intersection between race and business also creates an opportunity to gain profit from the commercialization of the black race. Therefore, we can learn how systemic bias is sustained and normalized in industries such as media and entertainment by examining racism from a business perspective. Adapted from Percival Everett's novel *Erasure*, the film *American Fiction* (2023) showcases how the African-American race has been exploited in the literary marketplace. The movie tells a story about how a black writer, Thelonius "Monk" Ellison, is frustrated due to the publishing industry's obsession in writing novels surrounding black stereotypes instead of representing them in a truthful manner. Frustrated by the market's requests, Monk decided to write a satirical novel filled with nothing but stereotypes and overblown tropes. Contrary to his beliefs, the novel sold a lot of copies and the critics keep overly praising it. This situation offers a problem: people only demand for representation in order to gain profit instead of representing them in a truthful and genuine way.

The movie also provides insights surrounding how racism can be more than just a tool to express prejudice, but it can also be a part of a business strategy to gain profits. Racism can be understood as a system that influences supply and demand within cultural industries from a business perspective. If something they made is perceived as commercially viable, media producers, publishers, and other stakeholders will continue to produce more of them. This often leads them making entertainment that revolves around stereotypes, the mainstream audience keep purchasing the products they made because they perceive them as "authentic". The role of economic incentives in this phenomenon raises important questions; Are these portrayals the result of audience demand, or are the producers and publishers silently expressing their

racial hatred? The increasing influence of media on public perception and globalization made this issue even more relevant. Societal attitudes are now shaped by films, literature, and other cultural products as they are no longer treated as mere forms of entertainment. Racial stereotypes contributed to these representations due to them being normalized and perpetuated now, making them feeling authentic and desirable instead of the other way around. In the movie, Monk succeeded in writing a novel that tackles every stereotype that the market is looking for. This means that a narrow and distorted view of racial identity are irrelevant as long as it is profitable and marketable. The conflict between artistic integrity and commercial success are also a topic that the movie tackles. Creators often face pressure to meet the industry standards in order to achieve financial stability and recognition, this is often caused by the creators' marginalized and demeaned backgrounds. Unconventional and nuanced narratives are now considered as less marketable; this is due to the limit in diversity and represented stories. Business framework now gets to not only pick who is worthy of telling the story, it is also responsible in deciding which stories deserved to be shared. The role of the consumers, or in this case, the audience preferences is another important aspect in the movie. The audience preferences play a huge role in determining what will and will not be successful. Due to repeated exposure and the popularity of stereotypical narratives, a deeper cultural attitude toward race has become more realized. Through the interaction between producers and consumers, racism has become more than just something that can be solely imposed from the top down. Addressing racism in media requires both structural and cultural shifts, understanding these aspects are important to identify the potential for change.

The “American narrative” has been gatekept by the western publishing and film industries for years. The structural architecture of the movie industries remains unchanging despite the recent shifts toward equity and inclusion (DEI). Surveys such as the Lee & Low Diversity Baseline indicate that approximately 71-74% of the publishing workforce identifies as white, with Black professionals making up only about 5% of editorial and executive roles as of 2023. The “institutional gaze”, created from a demographic imbalance, can dictate which stories are marketable, authentic, and “important”. Black representation being frequently connected to a “Trauma Economy” is a significant problem. The industry often prioritizes narratives that centre on slavery, civil rights struggles, and urban violence in order to achieve commercial success. These issues create a market of non-Black audience who are seeking moral catharsis, they can now have access to enjoy the sights of Black pain due to it being packaged as a luxury commodity. On top of it, Monk is often told his work is simply “not black

enough,” effectively categorizing his work due to him wanting to explore intellectual, domestic, or middle-class themes. The rise of what scholars call the “Diversity-Industrial Complex” further complicated the modern “business of racism”. Corporations are under intense pressure to showcase diverse voices in a post-2020 landscape. However, this often results in performative allyship, as satirized and portrayed in *American Fiction*. In order to satisfy brand metrics and avoid criticism, publishers “need” black trauma stories to incentivize a specific brand of “authentic” caricature. The industry refuses to see Black creators as multifaceted individuals and reinforce racial hierarchies, even though they are the very people who are responsible for profiting from the idea of dismantling racism. Black intellectuals are faced with a “Double Bind” problem, they are forced into a professional and psychological crisis due to the systemic environment that they are forced into. As a result, they can either remain invisible and financially unsupported by the mainstream market with the benefit of maintaining their artistic integrity. Or, they can achieve success at the cost of intellectual betrayal in order to accept market demands by performing stereotypical version of Blackness.

The purpose behind this research is to examine how the film *American Fiction* (2023) criticize the idea of how the American marketplace is capitalizing on the black community. This study aims to reveal how the “Business of Racism” operates, and investigate what mechanisms are being used. Specifically, this research aims to accomplish four main goals: First is to examine why non-black consumers are heavily demanding the publishing and film industries to create more “trauma-centric” stories. The second goal is to analyse the protagonist transition from Thelonious "Monk" Ellison to the caricature "Stagg R. Leigh". This research also aims to reveal the purpose behind the transition, and to reveal how the industry’s definition of “authentic” Blackness being incredibly rigid and narrow. The third goal is to analyse how “woke” gatekeepers and "performative allyship" are being portrayed in the movie, revealing how racial hierarchies and the exploitation of Black pain can still be reinforced by diversity initiatives. Lastly, is to connect the movie script’s internal satirical elements (intrinsic) with the real-world socio-economic theories of the "White Gaze" and "Interest Convergence" (extrinsic), this is to get a comprehensive grasp on the movie’s “Business Perspective” aspect.

1.2. Identification of the Problem

The institutionalized reduction of Black identity into a singular, market-driven commodity is the main issue identified in this study. The "business" of racism in American Fiction is not characterized by overt exclusion, it is characterized by a selective, predatory inclusion instead. When the industry appointed itself as the judge of racial truth, the problems began to arise. When Thelonious "Monk" Ellison wrote a complex, highbrow book, the publishers reject it. Due to the publishers' lens of expectations, they claim his writing lacks "Blackness". This means; there is a systemic gatekeeping problem in play: As long as Black artists perform a specific version of "marginalized life" that satisfies the majority's desire for moral justification, they are allowed to occupy the cultural stage. The study discovered that the movie shifted from portraying "prejudice-based" racism to "profit-based" racism. The publishers and critics featured in the film are considered as allies instead of villains. Their support, on the other hand, is heavily reliant on Monk's efforts in writing narratives that involved despair, struggle, and violence. This means the industry is encouraging the erasure of the actual, diverse lived experiences of Black individuals, while the industry is profiting from "Black stories" at the same time. The all-or-nothing game of representation is another issue that can be found in the movie. "We's Lives in da Ghetto", Sintara Golden's stereotypical bestseller novel, suggests that one type of Black story is enough to occupy the "market space". This forces other creators to compete for a limited, stereotypical niche, instead of writing intellectual, mundane, or "ordinary" Black narratives. And lastly, Monk is suffering from a psychological trap. He is forced into a dual-consciousness due to him creating a fictional, hardened persona of himself called "Stagg R. Leigh". This decision left him with two choices; he can either become visible by becoming a caricature, or remain authentic and invisible. In the end, the death of the artist's agency in exchange for commercial survival became the ultimate "cost" of the business of racism.

1.3 Limitation of the Problem

Based on the identification of the problem above, this research had put the emphasis on how the publishing and entertainment industries profited out of Racism and Structural Racial Discrimination.

1.4. Formulation of the Problem

Based on the limitation of the problem above, the formulation of the problems in this research are as follows:

1. What characteristics, plot, and setting are presented in the “American Fiction” movie script?
2. How does “American Fiction” portray the concepts of racism and outrageous stereotypes?
3. How does the conflict in the story contribute to the portrayal of racism in the business world?

1.5. Objectives of the Research

Based on the formulation of the problem above the objective of this research are as follows:

1. To identify and analyze the intrinsic elements such as characters, plot, and setting presented in the movie script of American Fiction.
2. To examine how the movie portrays the concepts of racism and outrageous stereotypes through its narrative and characters.
3. To analyze how the conflicts in the story contribute to the representation of racism within the business world.

1.6. Benefits of the Research

This research aims to provide at least two benefits regarding the comprehension of racism. Firstly, this research aims to expose the "Diversity Industrial Complex" by contributing to media studies and sociology. This research offers the idea that intellectual diversity is sacrificed by the market's demands for “authenticity” and trauma centric narratives. Secondly, this research recognizes the narrative's incentive for leaving minority creators with two choices; they can either keep their artistic integrity, or throw it away in order to achieve commercial survival. By challenging the structural hierarchies that performative allyship often preserves, the study can benefit the broader public by fostering media literacy regarding how the capitalist mechanisms turned racial struggle into a consumable spectacle.

1.7. Systematic Organization of the Research

The framework of the research entitled “**THE REPRESENTATION OF RACISM IN THE AMERICAN FICTION MOVIE SCRIPT**” is the following:

CHAPTER I : INTRODUCTION

This chapter consists of phases of the research, problem identification problem limitation, problem identification, problem formulation, research objectives, benefits, and the systematic organization of the research.

CHAPTER II : THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This chapter consists of the expert theories related to my research, Intrinsic Approach (sociology of literature theory, Characterization method, Plot, Setting, Plot), Extrinsic Approach (sociology of literature, Racism and Structural Racial Discrimination).

CHAPTER III : RESEARCH METHOD

This chapter consists of Research Methods, Benefits of research, Presentation Systematics, and Research scheme that are used during thesis writing.

CHAPTER IV : RESULT AND DISCUSSION

This chapter consists of the result of the findings and analysis of the research. The analysis of intrinsic and extrinsic approaches will be presented and elaborated further.

CHAPYER V : CONCLUSION

This chapter consists of conclusions that are taken from the research findings. The conclusion will be presented comprehensively and clearly in order to avoid confusion and to make it easier to comprehend.