

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background of the Study

The issue of racism is inextricably linked to the history of the United States, with all its complexities. Existed from the slavery era to the modern era, African Americans have experienced racial discrimination both in structural and cultural aspect. This long history of racism has given rise to a hierarchical construction of society that positions Caucasian American as superior and African American as inferior. Kendi (2017) argues that ideas portraying African American as inherently inferior exist to justify their perpetuation and dehumanizing treatment under white superiority. Similarly, Feagin (2020) explains that racial hierarchy functions not only as individual prejudice but also as a systemic structure embedded in social, political, and cultural institutions. This structure forms a social order that legitimizes unequal access to power, opportunity, and representation.

Recent data shows that this issue remains closely intertwined with the modern era. Discrimination against Black people still happens in various aspects of life. One of them can be seen in the data from the Pew Research Center, which indicates that the majority of Black people still experience discrimination in their daily lives. Black people also reported that they feel American social system does not fully support their mobility (Cox, 2024). Therefore, the fact then emerged that this systemic racial structure still plays an important role in the relation of powers

between White and Black groups.

Racial issues in popular culture are often represented through various media, and one of them is through film. Hall et al. (2025) state that media representations are rarely unbiased, rather they examine how power relations happens and how this helps reproduce them. In this regard, popular culture functions not only as entertainment but also as a space where society can reflect on and approach identity, power, and social reality. Harmon (1983) supported this idea by emphasizing that the function of popular culture extends beyond mere entertainment. Popular culture can also function as a form of criticism and reflection on social realities, norms, and societal behaviors.

One film that addresses this issue is *The American Society of Magical Negroes* (2024), directed by Kobi Libii. The film tells the story of Aren, a young Black man who meets Roger. Roger turns out to be a member of the Magical Negro society, and is want to recruit Aren into this secret society of Black individuals who have magical powers. The society focuses on maintaining the well-being of white people to avoid social conflict that could endanger the Black community. With the narrative built into the film, an interesting picture of the social relations between black and white groups in modern American society is presented.

Furthermore, the trope of the "Magical Negro" is also raised in this film. According to Glenn and Cunningham (2009), a Magical Negro is a Black character in a film who is depicted as being in a predominantly white people environment film, who is depicted as possessing special magical skills and abilities solely to

benefit the white characters in the story. The term was popularized by director Spike Lee in 2001 (as cited in Glenn & Cunningham, 2009) to criticize the Hollywood practice of positioning Black characters solely as "magical helpers." Over time, this trope has become clichéd and has undergone changes. Their characters are portrayed as socially inferior or illiterate with supernatural abilities (Hughey, 2009). While perceived as positive due to their special "magic," this trope is considered sociologically problematic because it places Black characters in a subordinate position. In this narrative pattern, they don't have any deeper exploration of their own roles, except their existence is deemed valuable only to the extent that they can provide kindness and comfort to the white characters.

The film *The American Society of Magical Negroes* (2024) offers a unique approach to this trope. The traditional "Magical Negro" trope is not reproduced, but rather used to explore how unequal social systems operate to regulate the treatment and identities of Black characters for the convenience of Whites. Beyond reflecting racial inequality, the use of this trope also opens up space to examine how interracial relations and the characters' social positions are shaped within an unequal societal structure. Therefore, this study is crucial for understanding the portrayal of racial hierarchy in *The American Society of Magical Negroes* (2024). Thus, this study is expected to contribute to the study of representations of race, power, and popular culture in contemporary American cinema.

1.2 Research Questions

Based on the background of the study, the problem of this study will be

divided into two primary analysis. The following are the research questions:

- 1.2.1 How are racial hierarchies represented through characterizations and settings in the film *The American Society of Magical Negroes* (2024)?
- 1.2.2 How does the film *The American Society of Magical Negroes* (2024) elaborate on racial conflicts within the context of racial hierarchy?

1.3 Objective of the Study

The purposes of this study are:

- 1.3.1 To identify how racial hierarchy is represented through characterizations and settings in the film *The American Society of Magical Negroes* (2024).
- 1.3.2 To understand how the film elaborates on the emergence of conflict within the context of racial hierarchy in *The American Society of Magical Negroes* (2024).

1.4 Scope of the Study

The scope of this research is limited to the analysis of the representation of racial hierarchy in the film *The American Society of Magical Negroes* (2024). This racial hierarchy is depicted through an analysis of the film's intrinsic elements, such as characters and characterization, setting, and conflict based on the definition put forward by Seymour Chatman in *Story and Discourse: Narrative Structure in Fiction and Film*. Next, this research will also analyze how racial hierarchy is represented in the film using Joe R. Feagin's theory *Systemic Racism: A theory of oppression* which focuses on the concept of racial hierarchy and white racial frame.

The discussion is limited to the analysis of the film's content and does not include external factors outside the film's text.

1.5 Previous Studies

This section discusses several previous studies relevant to the topic of racism as depicted in the film. These studies offer perspectives and theoretical frameworks on the representation of race in literature and visual media, that are useful for analyzing racial issues within the context of American society. Existing research also serves as a foundation for understanding how *The American Society of Magical Negroes* (2024) reflects similar racial issue dynamics.

The first study is a journal article by Arya Maulana and Yuli Wahyuni (2025), titled *Racial Discrimination Portrayed in American Society of Magical Negroes (2024)*. The focus of this study is to analyze the forms of racial discrimination portrayed in films. This study also aims to examine the strategy that the main character used to address them. It applies the theory CRT from Delgado & Stefancic's (2001) to identify stereotyping and exploitation, as the two forms of discrimination, and three strategies of resistance used by the main characters.

The second study is Muqni Aini Hijriah, Susiyati, and Mashuri's research in article journal titled *Systemic Racism: The Portrayal of Racial Injustice Seen In 'American Son' (2024)*. Drawing on the CRT theory by Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic, this study examines the representation of racial injustice and systemic racism in the film "American Son" (2019). They focus on the film's narrative

structure as well as the character dynamics to explore how systemic racism is depicted in the movie (Hijriah et al., 2024).

The third study is an academic article from Päivi Vääänen (2019) with the title *Afro- versus African futurism in Nnedi Okorafor's "The Magical Negro" and "Mother of Invention" (2019)*. The study provides a depiction of the continent of Africa in science fiction. It shows the changes from Africa's primitive clichés to the high technological capability ways. The objects of this study are short tales titled "The Magical Negro" and "Mother of Invention" from Nnedi Okorafor. These literary works provide issues about racist tropes found in sci-fi and also show the scholarly development of African and African-American identity. The objective of this study is to understand how these literary works represent the transition from Afrofuturism, which challenges racial stereotypes in America, to Africanfuturism, that based on African geography and culture.

The fourth study is entitled *Racializing Redemption, Reproducing Racism: The Odyssey of Magical Negroes and White Saviors* by Matthew W. Hughey (2012). Besides showing the portrayal of race, tropes like "Magical Negro" and "White Savior" are being explored in this study. This highlighted that despite the film's progressive appearance, they still often reinforce racial stereotypes. The study examines the depiction of White characters as rational and moral saviors in the films *The Green Mile* and *The Blind Side*. On the other hand, Black characters are depicted as connected to nature spiritually and primitively, and they often possess magical powers. The research argues that these portrayals perpetuate traditional views of racial differences as well as subtly reaffirm racial hierarchies

and historical power dynamics.

Previous studies give important perspectives to support the research of racial representation in literature and film. Although several studies have discussed racial discrimination, trope magical negroes, and racial injustice, there is still little analysis that examines the racial hierarchies in depth in contemporary films. This study not only intends to enrich research related to the representation of racial hierarchy in contemporary films, but also to depict the dynamics between black and white groups in the United States and how it relates to the narrative of the film within the context of racial hierarchy. It can also significantly contribute to the academic discourse on Black representation in visual media.

1.6 Method of Study

1.6.1 Data and Resources of Data

This research is based on primary and secondary data sources. The primary data for this research come from Kobi Libii's film *The American Society of Magical Negroes* (2024), including dialogues, narrative structures, and key scenes related to this study's topic. The secondary data serve as the basis for the theoretical framework and interpretation, which consist of books, scholarly works, journal articles, and the previous studies.

1.6.2 Method of Data Collection

This research uses a qualitative descriptive method. By using this method, the writer gains a deep understanding of social phenomena through the interpretation

of non-numerical data (Creswell, 2014). The writer carried out several stages of the data collection process in this study, with the first thing that the writer did was to gain a deep understanding of the storyline, characters, and context presented, the writer watched the film repeatedly. Second, the author transcribed the movie to convert the visual and audio data into written text for easier analysis. Next, the transcribed data were classified or categorized based on topics relevant to the research questions, namely racial hierarchy in the film. The final stage was to analyze the categorized data and draw conclusions in line with the research focus.

1.6.3 Method of Approach

In this study, the writer will use an objective approach to examine the film's intrinsic elements. For the extrinsic element, the writer will use the sociology of literature approach, as it is based on Laurenson's view that literary works function as social documents that reflect, interact with, and respond to societal conditions (Laurenson & Swingewood, 1972). Therefore, this approach is appropriate for this study's examination of the representation of racial issues in the film *The American Society of Magical Negroes* (2024). Joe R. Feagin's *Systemic Racism: A Theory of Oppression* is used as an analytical framework, specifically the concept of racial hierarchy and the white racial framework. To interpret the characters' attitudes, social positions, and interactions in the film, the writer also employed contextual analysis. Contextual analysis aimed to enable this study to answer the research questions provided. This approach was then applied by the writer to understand how the film reflects systemic racism and constructs racial hierarchies through its narrative and cinematic elements.

1.7 Research Organization

CHAPTER I INTRODUCTION

This chapter offers an introduction the study by providing the background of the study, research questions, objectives and scope, methodology, previous studies, and the organization of the overall thesis.

CHAPTER II INTRINSIC THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This chapter explains theories on intrinsic literary and film elements, including cinematography, which are used to analyze the selected film.

CHAPTER III EXTRINSIC THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This chapter presents the theoretical concepts related to extrinsic aspects which support the interpretation of the film.

CHAPTER IV DISCUSSION

This chapter discusses the findings of the analysis. It draws on the answer and the analysis of the research question by applying the theoretical framework written in Chapter II as well as Chapter III.

CHAPTER V CONCLUSION

This chapter include the overall summary of the study content that had been analyzed.