CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background of the Study

Religion has always played a significant role in shaping cultural and social dynamics, influencing the beliefs, values and daily lives of people. The study of the history of religion has evolved, and it is now widely accepted that religious beliefs are an essential part of our psychological and intellectual lives. Indeed, there is now a general agreement in the research community that 'everything turns upon problems of a profoundly deep religious character' (Cook, 1920, p. 378). Religion was a powerful emotional resource for American society in crisis, especially in the 1930s. During this period, conservative Protestantism was one of the main sources of strength, with many people turning to revivalist movements and renewing their devotion to evangelical traditions and the authority of the Bible (Carpenter, 1984). In Christianity, religion was often viewed as a means of spiritual power and moral control over believers. According to the French philosopher René Guénon, religion was considered *"knowledge free of all contingency"* (Raudino & Sohn, 2022), meaning it held authority beyond personal choice.

The Great Depression was another economic event of the 1930s that affected religious life in the United States. As it had a significant impact on religious life in the decade, with widespread unemployment, economic instability, and poverty creating a climate of uncertainty (Carpenter, 1984). Great Depression was the deepest, longest and most severe worldwide recession the United States experienced between 1929-1939.

Although the Great Depression had begun in the United States, it had drastic effects on output, high unemployment, and severe deflation in almost every country in the world. In addition to the economic shock, it caused a profound social crisis that forced families, churches and religious institutions to engage with individual and collective distress on an exceptional scale since the Civil War (Greene, 2019). In this atmosphere of suffering and uncertainty, Christianity was challenged to do more than offer consolation and address genuine social suffering. As Martin Luther King, Jr. preached in his sermon, *"It's Hard to Be a Christian"* (1956), Christianity is not a religion of comfort or sentimentality, but a demanding faith that requires self-denial, moral courage, and a costly commitment to justice.

This cultural background manifests clearly in the film *Sinners* (2025), a film that explores the different ways in which religion, class and music assemble to determine the life of the characters in the movie, particularly with the time it is set in 1930s Mississippi. A blend of historical reality and supernatural horror, the film by Ryan Coogler involves vampirism as a metaphor of racial violence and exploitation of the Jim Crow period. Jim Crow was a part of American history that existed between the late 19th century and the mid 1960s during which racial segregation and discrimination of the Americans of black race was enforced by law. It is also necessary to note that these laws led to an inequality status which was not only supported by the laws but also violence and daily social activities. At the same time, blues music can be viewed as spiritual and freedom, as something that religious communities believe is a sin when consumed out of church.

The narrative follows Sammie, a young guitarist caught between his preacher father's demands and his love for music. Blues music is a place of freedom and self-expression for Sammie. His father, however, feels that it is a bad influence as he believes Sammie is using music in the wrong way that is contrary to the doctrines and morals of religion. Alongside Sammie, there are twin brothers Smoke and Stack, portrayed by Michael B. Jordan in dual roles who represent two contrasting approaches to survival in a society marked by systemic racism and economic inequality. *Sinners* (2025) has received significant attention, earned 16 Oscar nominations and won Best Original Screenplay, Best Cinematography, Best Original Score, and Best Actor for Michael B. Jordan.

The thesis will be focused on an analysis of how *Sinners* (2025) reflects the power of religion and blues music in the 1930s in constructing the existential identity of Sammie. This study focuses on how *Sinners* (2025) incorporates symbolism and historical elements of 1930s America in its portrayal of religion, music, and identity formation. This research will explore how *Sinners* (2025) portrays religion in relation to personal identity and the social environment of its characters. At the same time, blues music seems to be an opposition to this power, which is represented by stability, resistance, and exploration of the meaning beyond religious doctrines. Through these aspects, this study will examine how *Sinners* (2025) presents the interaction between religion and blues music as central forces in shaping Sammie's existential identity within its 1930s historical setting.

1.2 Research Question

These questions aim to analyze how *Sinners* (2025) portrays religion and blues music in the 1930s as central forces in constructing Sammie's existential identity.

1. How are intrinsic elements used to portray Sammie in the construction of his existential identity in *Sinners* (2025)?
2. How does religion play as guidance and social control in constructing Sammie's existential identity?
3. How does blues music function as personal and black expression in the construction of Sammie's existential identity?

1.3 Objective of the Study

This study aims to examine how *Sinners* (2025) represents religion and blues music in the 1930s as influential forces in shaping and constructing Sammie's existential identity.

1. To analyze how the intrinsic elements in *Sinners* (2025) are used to portray the construction of Sammie's existential identity.
2. To analyze how religion play as guidance and social control in shaping Sammie's existential identity.
3. To examine how blues music function as personal and black expression in the construction of Sammie's existential identity.

1.4 Scope of the Study

The subject of this study will be the film *Sinners* (2025), in which the themes of religion and blues music of the 1930s will be explored and analyzed for their

contribution to the development of Sammie's existential identity in the context of 1930s Mississippi. The analysis will be done on intrinsic and extrinsic elements in the film to get a complete picture of the film. The intrinsic view of the study will focus on the theme, plot, characters and setting of the film with a particular focus on Sammie's conflict between his preacher father and his musical aspirations. The study will relate the film to its historical and cultural context, and recent great depression, Jim Crow segregation, religious institutions, and the cultural importance of the blues as a form of expression and resistance to identity development in the era.

The aim of this research is to demonstrate that moral authority and the pressure of society are utilized to shape Sammie's existence as well as religion influences him. It will also explore the impact of blues music on Sammie's existential identity, as it is a symbolic way of communicating his feelings and spirituality. This study seeks to illustrate the cultural struggles that occurred in the 1930s in the state of Mississippi and to offer new insights into the interplay of religion, blues music and Sammie's existential journey and identity building process by considering the historical context and film methods.

1.5 Previous Studies

In order to analyze the subjects covered in this study, it is essential to examine previous studies on the topic. Since *Sinners* (2025) is a recently released movie, there hasn't been many scholarly research done on it yet. Nonetheless, relevant previous studies on related subjects and themes offers helpful background for this study.

The first previous study is an article written by Terri Bowles (2025) entitled *"At the Crossroads: Ryan Coogler's Metaphysical Meditation on Blues Music's Power of*

Salvation and the Terror of Racial Predation in "Sinners"" (Bowles, 2025). It elaborates on the ways in which the film *Sinners* (2025) both represents and suggests the blues as a cultural expression and also as a metaphysical force that exists on the edge of salvation and destruction in the historical context of 1930s Mississippi. The study places particular emphasis on blues music as a cultural resistance to racial terror, and on blues music as a 'metaphor of the supernatural' and the 'metaphor of history'. This research, however, provides a more specific focus, in that it deals with the role of religion in generating moral pressure and internal conflict in the construction of Sammie's existential identity. This study will take a different approach to blues music and analyze it as a personal area of freedom and self-expression rather than as a cultural resistance. This research further explores this relationship between religious authority, personal desire, and cultural expression and how they work to build Sammie's sense of self in the spiritual and social context of the 1930s Mississippi.

The second previous studies is a 2020 movie by August Wilson, *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*. In the journal article *"Blues, African Legacy and Blacks' Identity in Ma Rainey's Black Bottom"* (Coulibaly, 2024), the emphasis was placed on the importance of blues music as a cultural and historical weapon to preserve the African heritage and build the African identity in America. The article states that, despite the pressure from white producers, Ma Rainey's commitment to keeping the authenticity of blues alive is an indication of the community's resistance to cultural assimilation and exploitation. It also emphasizes the African-American values, solidarity and cultural survival found in blues music. The study's relevance is that in *Sinners* (2025), blues music is a means of identifying as a man. This is a process of identity formation from the 1930s onwards,

and represents a voyage of self-discovery for Sammie, as he struggles against religious and racial constraints imposed by society.

A more relevant previous study would be the musical *Hamilton: An American Musical* (2015). The discussion will focus on how the musical represents America through a combination of politics, history and popular culture, as detailed in the article *"Hamilton and the Poetics of America"* (Arouh & Delikonstantinidou, 2023). The authors remind readers that hip-hop has also helped centre people of colour as key players in the bedrock narrative of US history, raising conversations about representation and what has been left out of the narrative. This relates to the research, as Hamilton uses music to shape narratives of identity. In *Sinners* (2025), the blues in the 1930s is seen to help shape Sammie's search for identity as he is torn between religious authority and cultural expression.

Next, this article focuses on the film *The Last Temptation of Christ* (1988) by Martin Scorsese. The journal article *"Critical Stylistic Analysis of Self-Conflict in Kazantzakis' The Last Temptation of Christ"* by Sallomi and Sahan (2023) offers a critical stylistic analysis of the self-conflict experienced by the main character Jesus Christ. The main character is tempted by fear, lust, doubt and the temptation of power. These temptations are at the core of the film and also symbolize the typical human struggle between earthly desires and spiritual aspirations. This article is relevant to the research because the main character in the film *Sinners* (2025), Sammie, also experiences conflict due to his strict Christian upbringing and his passion for the blues. His struggle to find identity is between his faith and his desires and how he can express himself through music.

Another previous study is on the film *First Reformed* (2017). In the article *"Will God Forgive Us for What We're Doing to His Creation?: American Religious Attitudes and Climate Scepticism in Paul Schrader's First Reformed"* (Elkins, 2021), the study examines the film First Reformed and how the film portrays the crisis of faith and despair experienced by Reverend Toller as he confronts climate change and the failures of institutional religion. The study argues that the film portrays America's religious dualities particularly the progressive Christianity and the conservative fundamentalism and how these two types of religious views affect attitudes toward current social issues. In the film *Sinners* (2025), religion is portrayed as a source of comfort and oppression placing the main character Sammie in a crisis of existential identity. Much like the Reverend Toller in the film *First Reformed*, Sammie struggles with how his faith affects his choices, however whereas Toller is unable to find a way out of his crisis of faith the main character Sammie finds a way out of his crisis of identity in the blues music. This film was set in the 1930s and the way that the main character finds relief from the religious and societal expectations placed upon him through the blues music is similar to the way that in the early 20th century African Americans found a way to express themselves and relieve the oppression of racism through the blues music as well.

Lastly, the film *Mudbound* (2017) is analyzed in "*Racial Discrimination Towards African American in Dee Rees's Mudbound"* (Raharjo, 2020). The study reveals the racial discrimination that African Americans experienced in 1940s Mississippi under the Jim Crow laws. This study particularly shows how the African Americans were discriminated in public places and in the workplaces, as well as how the Black war veterans were treated after they returned from wars. They were humiliated and

marginalized by the white society. This is also the case in the film *Sinners* (2025). The racial discrimination and the social hierarchy in Mississippi are the two main issues that restrict the freedom of the Black characters in both films. While *Mudbound* focuses on the marginalization of its characters, *Sinners* (2025) on the other hand focuses on the way the characters struggle with their identity and how they are restricted by the religion in which they grow up. Both films, however, show how the Black characters express their resistance to the racist society through their survival and through blues music.

1.6 Research Method

1.6.1 Data and the Source of Data

Primarily, this study is based on the film *Sinners* (2025) by Ryan Coogler. The film is set in the Jim Crow era of the 1930's in Mississippi, United States, and follows Sammie, exploring how he is defined by religion and his musical roots the Blues. The study will explore the role of religion in the life of Sammie as a moral guide and as a method of social control as well as the role of the blues music in his emotional and spiritual life in the context of his cultural world. Books, journal articles, and scholarly works on the Jim Crow South, the cultural importance of the blues, and the context of the Great Depression are all supporting sources used.

1.6.2 Method of Data Collection

This research will use library research as the method of data collection. There will be both primary and secondary data. The main information comes from a direct observation of the movie *Sinners* (2025), paying attention to the main events, dialogues, character development and music. Secondary data will be obtained from books, journal

articles, research papers and online publications related to religion, music, and cultural conditions in the 1930s American South. These two types of data will be collected to support analysis in both a textual and contextual manner.

1.6.3 Method of Approach

This research will adopt qualitative descriptive research method. It applies the techniques of *A Glossary of Literary Terms* by M. H. Abrams and Geoffrey Galt Harpham to analyse the thematic structure, plot, character and character development, setting, conflict and sound of the film. Examining these aspects of the narrative can help to reveal how the narrative's internal structure supports Sammie's journey and the importance of the narrative. Furthermore, Jean Paul Sartre's *Existentialism* is employed to understand the conflict in which Sammie finds himself, between his own need for freedom, authenticity and self-definition and the dominant religious values of his community, as he thrusts himself in between his father's expectations as a preacher and those values. This study will use these lenses to shed light on how *Sinners* (2025) portrays religion and blues music as two interacting forces that shape Sammie's existential identity against the backdrop of historical and cultural contexts.

1.7 Organization of The Writing

CHAPTER I INTRODUCTION

Chapter I of this thesis proposal presents the introduction of the study. It is divided into seven sub-sections: Background of the Study, Research Questions, Objectives of the Study, Scope of the Study, Previous Studies, Research Method, and Writing Organization.

CHAPTER II INTRINSIC THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS

Chapter II discusses the intrinsic elements of the film, including theme, plot, characters, and setting. The analysis will explore how these elements portray Sammie's struggle with religion and blues music in shaping his existential identity.

CHAPTER III EXTRINSIC THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS

Chapter III examines the film through theory of Jean-Paul Sartre's Existentialism, focusing on freedom, identity, and the cultural significance of blues music in 1930s Mississippi.

CHAPTER IV DISCUSSION

Chapter IV presents the integrated analysis of intrinsic and extrinsic elements, highlighting how religion and blues music function as central forces in constructing Sammie's existential identity.

CHAPTER V CONCLUSION

The final chapter provides a summary of the research findings, restates the significance of the study, and offers concluding remarks on how *Sinners* (2025) critiques historical systems of power and preserves history through storytelling.

REFERENCES