

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background of the Study

In delving into the intricate tapestry of the subject matters, it is important to first understand the American Studies as a discipline used for this study. As Henry Nash Smith stated in his book titled *Virgin Lane: The American West as Symbol and Myth*, American Studies includes the basic analysis of myths, symbols, and stories that shape the American character. He contends that the American experience is profoundly interwoven with social myths and symbols, and concentrating on these components is vital for figuring out the country's set of experiences and society. His work has successfully encouraged researchers in the field to dive into the components that shape the stories of American history and culture (Smith, 2009:270).

Directed by Ava DuVerney, the *When They See Us* series has successfully portrayed the issues of legal injustice and institutional racism that has caused real-life negative impacts on Black people based on an actual tragedy known as the Central Park Five that occurred on April 19, 1989. In all four episodes, this series focuses on the lives of five black and Latino boys from Harlem, New York: Kevin Richardson, Raymond Santana, Korey Wise, Yusef Salaam, and Anton McCray, also known as the Central Park Five. This series highlights the issues of institutional racism that lead to legal injustice, which are firmly ingrained matters in the United States and continue to impact the lives of marginalized groups, particularly African Americans and other people of color.

Throughout history, the United States has made significant progress in fighting against racial injustice, including the abolition of slavery, the civil rights movement, and

the enforcement of anti-discrimination laws. Nevertheless, deep-rooted systemic racism remains in various forms in the criminal justice system. Racial disparities in detention, conviction, and incarceration rates have been well documented in the *When They See Us* series. Black people are disproportionately affected at every stage of the criminal justice process. The dehumanization and criminalization of black people in America is a devastating legacy that continues to take part in the lives of countless individuals, families, and communities.

Based on what Meadows-Fernandez wrote in his book titled *Investigating Institutional Racism*, institutional racism refers to the structural and systemic prejudices, practices, and laws that encourage racial inequality in a variety of institutional fields, including the criminal justice system, the educational system, the real estate sector, and the healthcare industry (Meadows-Fernandez, 2018:5). On the other hand, legal injustice, according to Austin Sarat and Thomas R. Kearns in their book titled *Justice and Injustice in Law and Legal Theory*, refers to unfair trials, racial profiling, and other types of prejudice within the legal system (Austin and Thomas, 1996:35). These two issues are closely related and help to keep racial inequalities, injustice, and the unfair treatment of people of color in the United States in their place.

The writer intends this study to explore how institutional racism and legal injustice are represented and portrayed in the *When They See Us* mini-series because this provides a compelling and emotional portrait of institutional racism and legal injustice against black people. Thus, the writer conducts a thorough analysis of the criminal justice system and racial disparities in the United States that are being portrayed in the series to contribute to the ongoing debate on systemic racism in the United States, focusing on the criminal justice system. This study aims to promote a

deeper understanding of these issues and raise readers' awareness about the realities of racial bias and its impacts on black individuals.

1.2 Research Problems

1. What are the impacts of legal injustice and racism towards Black people portrayed throughout the intrinsic and extrinsic elements of the mini-series?
2. How do institutional racism and legal injustice affect Black people in the mini-series?

1.3 Objectives of the study

1. To analyze the impacts of institutional racism and legal injustice towards Black people as depicted in *When They See Us* (2019) mini-series.
2. To analyze and explain the portrayal of the intrinsic aspects used in *When They See Us* (2019) mini-series.

1.4 Previous Studies

In analyzing the discussion of this study, sources related to the *When They See Us* mini-series are needed to provide information to strengthen the discussion and make it more comprehensive. There are three articles that the writer found that are relevant to this study.

The first study is from Slamet Adi Raharjo's thesis titled *Racial Discrimination Towards African-Americans in Dee Rees's Mudbound* (Faculty of Humanities, Diponegoro University, 2020). Comparable to the writer's thesis, this thesis discusses racism and discrimination against African-American people. However, this thesis focuses on different matters, highlighting racism during the Jim Crow Law period.

The second study that the writer uses is Adhitama Setia Rahmawardhana's thesis titled *Racial Discrimination Towards Black People as Depicted in the Movie Remember the Titans* (Faculty of Humanities, Diponegoro University, 2020). This thesis analyzes

racial discrimination and segregation using a sociological approach. The purpose of this thesis is to get a complete understanding of the issues that are directly happening in and affecting society.

The third study is Maria Friska Theresa Listyoningtyas's thesis, *The Power of Unity of the Blacks Against Racial Discrimination, Portrayed in Ava Duvernay's Selma Movie* (Faculty of Humanities, Diponegoro University, 2019). This thesis analyzes a movie from the same director as the writer's thesis. The director is an African-American woman who actively produces films portraying racism and discrimination against her people. This thesis analyzes the racial resistance of African-American people against racists.

1.5 Scope of Study

This study aims to analyze the impact of institutional racism and legal injustice towards black people in America depicted in the *When They See Us* mini-series by thoroughly examining the extrinsic and intrinsic elements used in the mini-series. This study stands out by offering a distinctive approach to the examination of legal injustice, as it explores the complex relationship between racism and the legal system within the defined scope of analysis. While previous studies have explored aspects of racism independently, this study takes a sociological approach in film by comprehensively investigating how these two issues intersect and mutually influence each other within the *When They See Us* mini-series.

1.6 Methods of the Study

The writer utilizes two forms of research methods in this paper. They are the method of research and the method of approach.

1.6.1 Methods of Research

The writer uses the library research method to gather the relevant data to strengthen

the topics discussed in the study. According to Mary W George, library research methods imply finding and using sources that provide reliable data or personal/expert opinions on a research subject, which is also a requirement of all other research methods at some point (George, 2008:50). This method consists of collecting data and information from reliable sources such as journals, papers, and scholarly books.

1.6.2 Methods of Approach

In this study, the writer utilizes Abrams's objective approach to analyze the intrinsic elements of the *When They See Us* (2019) mini-series. In his book titled *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, Abrams states that the objective approach is a way to analyze literary work with only its intrinsic aspects and free from extrinsic factors (Abrams, 2012:70). The writer will examine the intrinsic elements of this mini-series such as theme, characters, plot, setting, and conflict and cinematographic element which is the camera distance.

As for the extrinsic aspects, the writer utilizes Jean-Louis Comolli's sociological approach in film to analyze how legal injustice and institutional racism portrayed in this mini-series affect, subvert, or uphold societal norms, values, and power structures, offering insights into general social dynamics and challenges (Comolli, 2015:185).

1.7 Writing Organization

Chapter 1: Introduction

In the first chapter, the writer explains the research's introduction and why it is needed. This chapter summarizes research topics and includes background of the study, research problems, objective of the study, previous study, and scope of the study.

Chapter 2: Theory and Method

In this second chapter, the writer will elaborate on the theories and methods that are used to analyze and collect the data related to the topic of this research.

Chapter 3: Result and Discussion

This chapter is a summary of the findings of this research, which is written in a systematic and orderly manner with supporting arguments based on the analysis of the collected data.

Chapter 4: Conclusion

In this chapter, conclusions are presented which are critical generalizations of the results of data analysis obtained from the research.