

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background of the Study

American society has predominantly framed inequality through the lens of racism, viewing oppression as discrimination based on racial categories. Historically, race remains the most visible and immediately accessible indicator of social standing in everyday American life, so much so that ordinary people continue to rely on racial categories to make sense of the social world around them (Gans, 2005, p. 17). Yet race alone cannot fully explain the structural oppression that maintains inequality across generations, a gap that Isabel Wilkerson addresses in her book *Caste: The Origins of Our Discontents* (2020), a work of narrative nonfiction blending historical analysis and personal storytelling to argue that race is the skin and caste is the bone (Wilkerson, 2020, p.17).

Through extensive research and years of travel in America, Germany, and India, Isabel developed her own conceptual framework of caste. Wilkerson argues that beneath racism lies a deeper hierarchical system, which she categorizes into eight pillars of caste. From there, filmmaker Ava DuVernay brought this argument to a wider audience in the biographical film *Origin* (2023), which depicts Wilkerson's intellectual journey across three historical and geographical contexts then showcases Isabel's journey as she interacts with academics, family members, and testimonies that gradually shape her caste framework.

Yet the characters in the film *Origin* (2023) respond to Wilkerson's argument about caste differently, depending on their backgrounds and life experiences. This variation reveals that recognition of caste requires social and intellectual tools to name it. The film examines it through the lens of Pierre Bourdieu's concept of habitus, which is defined as “*thoughts, perceptions, expressions, and actions whose limits are set by the historically and socially situated conditions of their production*” (Bourdieu, 1977, p. 98). The characters in the film respond to Wilkerson's argument in different ways because each character brings a distinct experience to the social world. Some characters recognize that something wrong has been done to them and to people who look like them, but that recognition stops at the racism framework. And others resist Wilkerson's argument because the framework they grew up with has always been sufficient to make sense of the world they inhabit. Moreover, this habitus gains further weight within what Bourdieu calls a field, which is defined as “*a structured social arena, such as the legal, educational, or domestic sphere, in which individuals occupy positions and compete for resources according to the rules of that field*” (Bourdieu, 1977, p. 72).

This difference is also shaped by cultural capital, which Bourdieu describes as “*the accumulated knowledge, skills, and credentials that shape an individual's capacity to perceive and name social structures*” (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 243). It leads some people to continue using race to judge strangers because racial features remain the most visible and accessible indicators of social status (Gans, 2005, p. 17). And because of it, characters without sufficient cultural capital can only see race as a framework, not the caste structure underneath. It also connects to what Bourdieu

calls symbolic power, which is “*the ability of a social order to make itself look natural and unquestionable*” (Bourdieu, 1991, p. 163). It makes people who are dominated often accept their own subordination as normal and not question it.

Beyond the individual characters in the film, Wilkerson's argument also carries a transnational scope which the film *Origin* (2023) brings to life through its narrative. And it requires cultural capital to understand that America is not its only case, but as part of a global system in which ideas, hierarchies, and power structures always cross national boundaries (Fishkin, 2004, p. 22). In her research journey, Wilkerson discovered a photograph in Berlin's Topography of Terror Museum documenting a meeting on June 5, 1934, attended by Nazi lawyers around the same period American segregation laws were being studied. This finding aligns with Whitman's argument that Nazi jurists directly studied the Jim Crow model when drafting the Nuremberg Laws (Whitman, 2017, p. 2), showing that the United States serves as a foundation for systematic global oppression. However, recognizing this connection requires cultural capital. Without it, individuals will view racism as an American problem, rather than a caste system that Wilkerson identifies.

While existing scholarship has examined Wilkerson's argument and DuVernay's film separately, no study has yet analysed the film *Origin* (2023) through the lens of Pierre Bourdieu's theoretical framework. This study addresses that gap by examining how cultural capital and habitus determine characters' recognition of Wilkerson's framework and how symbolic power and field theory represent Wilkerson's caste framework as a transnational system across American, Germany, and Indian. Employing Bourdieu's theoretical framework as the primary

analytical lens, this research contributes to American Studies by demonstrating that what American society believes to be racism is a structural caste system, and by showing through the characters' varied responses in the film *Origin* (2023).

1.2 Research Questions

1. How do habitus and cultural capital determine American characters' ability to recognize Wilkerson's caste framework in *Origin* (2023)?
2. How does transnational caste system across three fields in the film *Origin's* (2023) represent symbolic power and field theory?

1.3 Objectives of the Study

1. To analyse how habitus and cultural capital determine American characters' ability to recognize Wilkerson's caste framework in the film *Origin* (2023).
2. To examine how transnational caste system across three fields in the film *Origin's* (2023) represent symbolic power and field theory.

1.4 Scope of the Study

This research centers on the biographical film *Origin* (2023) as the primary source, examined through Pierre Bourdieu's theoretical framework, focusing on cultural capital and habitus to examine how American characters recognize Wilkerson's framework, also how symbolic power and field theory represent

Wilkerson's caste framework as a transnational system across America, Germany, and India. For the intrinsic analysis, the researcher draws on M.H. Abrams' literary framework to examine theme, plot, character, setting, conflict, and camera movements as the narrative elements. Other supporting evidence is drawn from scholarly journals on caste, race, and transnational system.

1.5 Previous Studies

The first previous study is a thesis by Ejiro (2020) titled "*An Analysis of DuVernay's 'When They See Us' Through the Lens of Critical Race Theory*." This research was to explore how the film portrays the systemic bias and inherent racism within the American criminal justice system, specifically focusing on the 1989 Central Park Five case. Ejiro analysed how microaggressions, racial stereotypes, and implicit biases lead to the disproportionate mistreatment of people of colour by employing Critical Race Theory (CRT) and standpoint theory. The study concludes that education is important for dismantling these oppressive structures. However, while Ejiro focuses on the domestic legal failures of the U.S. justice system, this research identifies a gap in the absence of a transnational perspective. Unlike Ejiro's work, which examines inequality solely within the United States, this study expands the analysis to a global scale by examining the interconnectedness of American, German, and Indian caste systems through DuVernay's newer work, *Origin* (2023).

The second study is a dissertation by Jain (2023) titled "*From Abolishing Untouchability to a Philosophy of Liberatory Education: W.E.B. Du Bois and B.R.*

Ambedkar in Dialogue." This research examined the philosophical and conceptual parallels between the struggles of Black Americans and Indian Dalits. Through a comparative analysis of W.E.B. Du Bois and B.R. Ambedkar, Jain explored how both intellectuals utilized education as a form of "liberatory pedagogy" to challenge white supremacy and untouchability. The study successfully demonstrates that the "Veil" of racial segregation in America functions analogously to the caste hierarchy's violence in India. While Jain provides a profound philosophical foundation for the Afro-Dalit connection, a gap in these studies lies in the analysis medium. Jain's work is primarily historical and philosophical, thus lacking cinematic and visual representation. This study addresses that gap by focusing on how the film *Origin* (2023) visually and narratively represents these philosophical connections through its characters and their varying abilities to identify caste.

The third previous study is an article by Asrita et al. (2023) titled "*Representation of Racism in The Film 'Till'.*" This study examined how racism is represented in the biographical film *Till* (2022), which is set in the Jim Crow era of the United States. Using Ferdinand de Saussure's semiotic analysis and Stuart Hall's representation theory, the researchers identified two forms of racism operating in the film: individual racism and systemic racism, which were analysed through components such as stereotypes, separatism, and discrimination. The study shows that racism in America is not only perpetuated through individual behaviour but is also institutionally reinforced. However, while Asrita et al. provide a strong argument for understanding how racism is represented in film through signs and symbols, their study operates in semiotic analysis. This research addresses that gap

by employing Bourdieu's cultural capital and habitus to examine how characters' varying social positions determine their capacity to recognize caste as the underlying structure of American inequality in the film *Origin* (2023).

The fourth study is an article by Mirzaei et al. (2024) titled "*Analysis of Cultural Capital and Identity Formation in the Animated Movies... Based on Pierre Bourdieu's Theory of Cultural Capital*." This study examines how cultural capital shapes the identity of characters in selected animated films. Employing Pierre Bourdieu's theoretical framework, the researchers investigated how cultural capital determines a character's social position and self-perception within the narrative world. The findings show that identities that appear from differential access to embodied and institutionalized cultural capital can shape characters' habitus and guide their social. However, while Mirzaei et al. successfully apply Bourdieu's theory to animation, their research does not engage with transnational oppression as it operates in historical dramas. This study addresses that gap by moving beyond individual identity to examine how cultural capital determines caste consciousness and the capacity to recognize global structures of power, as demonstrated through the transnational context of the film *Origin* (2023).

The fifth study is an article by Wilson (2009) titled "*Toward a Framework for Understanding Forces that Contribute to or Reinforce Racial Inequality*." This study examines how racial inequality in the United States is maintained through two types of structural forces (discrimination and segregation) and indirect forces (economic shifts and political decisions) that disproportionately affect people of colour. Wilson argues that neither structural nor cultural explanations alone are

sufficient to explain outcomes for racial groups and proposes an integrated framework that accounts for both. The study successfully shows that racial inequality in America is maintained by forces embedded within the broader social and economic system. However, while Wilson provides an interesting structural analysis of American racial inequality, his framework does not address Wilkerson's argument that racism is merely the outer layer of a deeper caste system, nor does it draw on Bourdieu's concepts of cultural capital and habitus to explain why individuals within the same structural conditions perceive inequality differently. This research addresses that gap by examining how cultural capital and habitus determine characters' recognition of Wilkerson's pillars of caste as the underlying structure of American inequality in the film *Origin* (2023).

1.6 Method of the Study

1.6.1 Method of Research

This research utilizes both primary and secondary data sources. The primary data consists of the biographical film *Origin* (2023), which is analysed through a close examination of its narrative structure, character interactions about caste consciousness, and its dialogue. Secondary data consists of Pierre Bourdieu's theoretical works on cultural capital, habitus, symbolic power, and field theory, as well as scholarly articles on transnational American studies, and is complemented by several academic journals focusing on related issues of social hierarchy.

1.6.2 Method of Approach

This study employs a qualitative approach grounded in Pierre Bourdieu's theoretical framework that begins with a close reading of Bourdieu's theoretical texts to establish the conceptual foundation, followed by a thorough reading of Wilkerson's *Caste: The Origins of Our Discontents* (2020) to understand the argument the film adapts, and is supported by relevant scholarly journals that connect both frameworks to the film's socio-cultural and historical contexts. Therefore, having multiple viewings of the film *Origin* (2023) is necessary to examine how these frameworks manifest the film's narrative, characters, and cinematic choices.

