

# CHAPTER I

## INTRODUCTION

### 1.1. Background of the Study

Literature mirrors reality. Gabriel (2020) describes literature and human life as something that cannot be distanced as one produces another, and human beings perceive their picture, ills, and mores through the mirror that is literary genres. These genres are reflection of the reality that humans live in, as it reflects what is currently happening in many parts of the globe as it happened and will always take place in a better or worse way (Gabriel, 2020).

Among many realities that is reflected in literary works, the practice of sexism is one of the realities that is often reflected in literary works. Sexism is defined as a discriminatory practice that is conducted towards certain individuals based on their belonging to a specific biological sex and their expected characteristics and behavior (Torregrosa-Ruiz, Molpeceres, & Tomás, 2017). While it may overlap with the concept of gender discrimination, the concept of sexism is considered to be broader as it includes beliefs, attitudes, and social norms in addition to discriminatory practices and actions (Stepanikova et al., 2020). As the range of sexism covers not only beliefs and attitudes—which is often restricted to individuals—but also social norms that may include organizational, institutional, and cultural practices, it can be concluded that sexism is not a practice that is limited

to individual sources only, but also a practice that can be embedded in institutional practices (Barreto & Ellemers, 2007).

The practice of sexism is one among many types of discrimination that has been proven to be stressful and harmful for health, especially psychologically. A study conducted by Stepanikova et al. (2020) revealed that perceived gender discrimination contributes to higher depressive symptoms among childbearing women. The study also found that it impacts women from various background, including those with higher education, as the study found the existence of a stronger association between everyday discrimination and psychological distress among college-educated Asian Americans compared to their less-educated counterparts. The researchers speculated that the strong association between discrimination and psychological distress among higher educated women exists due to increased exposure to discrimination in workplace—especially one that is male-dominated—alongside with higher awareness and less tolerance of discrimination. However, the speculation has yet to be proven.

While Stepanikova et al. (2020) highlighted the relation between discriminatory practices in a public sphere such as workplaces and depressive symptoms in women, Park et al. (2015) highlighted discriminatory practice towards women in a more private sphere, which is the domestic sphere. According to Park et al. (2015), division of roles for women in the domestic sphere, where women are expected to be dutiful daughters and daughters-in-law, attentive wives, and caring mothers who took full responsibilities of domestic duties such as childrearing and childcare while the husbands are not expected to share similar workload contributes

to prenatal depression in women, which is well known as a significant predictor and risk factor of postnatal depression—a major health concern that produces negative effects on new mothers, their infant, and their families (Klainin & Arthur, 2009).

In addition to Park's study which highlighted the gendered division of roles in family, sexism in the private sphere is also noted by O'Reilly (2010) in the way it idealizes motherhood in a patriarchal way. Sexism in the patriarchal idealization of motherhood is manifested in the way it deprives women of selfhood and isolates them in the private sphere, assigns household and caretaking chores to women, as well as imposes unrealistic mothering standards onto women (O'Reilly, 2010). This deprivation of selfhood that women went through due to the patriarchal idealization of motherhood may lead to the feeling of losing identity, which according to feminist scholars is also linked to the previously mentioned postnatal depression (Mauthner, 1998).

Postnatal depression, often characterized by depressive symptoms such as depressed mood and notable diminished pleasure in almost all activities, occurs approximately within 4 weeks postpartum. Postnatal depression is considered to be an important concern because it can be quite severe (Wood et al., 2010 as cited in Chung et al., 2012) and advance to a full-blown PPD or psychosis (APA, 2002, as cited in Chung et al., 2012). In addition, suicidal ideation often occurs to depressed mothers. While postnatal depression-related suicide rates are lower compared to those in the non-childbearing population, suicide is responsible for 28 percent of all female deaths during the first postpartum year, and suicide has also become one of the three major factors in maternal mortality rates (Tavares et al., 2012).

The cause of postnatal depression remains unclear as of now, but several risk factors have been introduced. Among them are the aforementioned prenatal depression, pre-pregnancy depression, stressful life events, low social support, and childcare stress (Robertson et al., 2003, cited in Stepanikova & Kukla, 2017).

*Kim Ji-young, Born 1982* is a literary work in the form of fiction novel written by Korean author Cho Nam-joo. Published in 2016, the novel tackles the issues of everyday sexism and misogyny that women faced both in the past and present day and both in public and domestic sphere, while also presenting the story of how the main character, an ordinary Korean woman named Kim Ji-young, struggled with symptoms of depression after motherhood, which revealed as a postnatal depression later on the book. *Kim Ji-young, Born 1982* is one of South Korea's best-selling novel, with the novel selling more than a million of copies as of 2018, being the first one to do so since 2009. As of 2020, the novel has been translated into 12 languages while also became longlisted for 2020's National Book Award for Translated Literature.

For the purpose of analyzing the elements of sexism and its relation to postnatal depression in *Kim Ji-young, Born 1982*, this study will use the feminist perspective of postnatal depression, focusing on Nicolson's theory of postnatal depression as a grief response to losses that women suffered as they transitioned to motherhood, and Freud's theory of Mourning and Melancholia. Nicolson's theory of postnatal depression as a grief response is chosen as the losses that a woman suffer following transition to motherhood appear to be intricately linked with women's inferior status in society. Nicolson's theory of postnatal depression as a

grief response will be further supported by Freud's theory of Mourning and Melancholia, which essentially explores how an individual's response to an object loss would lead to grief and melancholia.

Studies regarding sexism and postnatal depression in literary works have been conducted previously by various researchers. However, to the writer's knowledge, no studies regarding the portrayal of sexism and its relationship to postnatal depression in literary works have been done yet. In a study titled *Representing Postpartum Depression in Contemporary Cinema: Cristina Comencini's Quando La Note and Alina Marazzi's Tutto parla Di Te*, Giulia Po DeLisle (2018) examined the representation of postpartum depression in two Italian movies, and found that the representation of postpartum in both movies is shown through the facets of motherhood that the movie portrayed. While DeLisle's study examined the representation of postnatal depression in a literary work, the study did not cover the topic of sexism and its relationship with postnatal depression.

In a study titled *Depressed Housewives as Results of Woman Oppression Found in Short Stories: A Comparative Literature Study*, Hambur (2019) discussed and elaborated how women oppression as a social phenomenon and women depression as a psychological phenomenon correlates to each other. Hambur (2019) found that domestic women experienced depression due to their lack of social activities outside. While this study is similar to the topic that will be discussed in this research, this study focused on depression as a mood disorder in general instead of postnatal depression.

Stepanikova et al. (2020) discussed the correlation between gender discrimination and depressive symptoms among women, and found that there is indeed a correlation between the two. The difference between these previous studies and this research is that one would focus on the portrayal of sexism and its relation to postnatal depression in a literary work.

### **1.2. Research Question**

The research questions of this study is as follows:

1. How does sexism contribute to postnatal depression in *Kim Ji-Young, Born 1982*?

### **1.3. Research Objectives**

Relating to the research questions of the study, this study aims to investigate how sexism became the contributing factor to the main character's postnatal depression in the novel *Kim Ji-young, Born 1982*.

### **1.4. Scope of the Study**

The scope of this study is limited to the topic of how sexism directed at housewives contributes to postnatal depression as presented in the novel *Kim Ji-young, Born 1982*. This study will not provide further investigation regarding the relation between sexism and postnatal depression in medical context.

### **1.5. Significance of the Study**

Sexism has been an issue that is prevalent both in the past and the present times. However, it is also an issue that is often overlooked due to how internalized it was among the society, making the effect of its practice became overlooked as well. Therefore, this study is expected to raise the readers' awareness regarding

sexism and how harmful it can be to mental health by describing and analyzing the portrayal of sexism and its link to postnatal depression in *Kim Ji-young, Born 1982*.

