

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background of the Study

United States of America has a long history of racial oppression (Feagin, 2001). Oppression refers to the practice where one group has more access to power and privilege than another group, and uses that power and privilege to maintain their status quo by dominating the other group (David & Derthick, 2014, as cited in Torino et al., 2019). Hence, this system enables the ruling race to exert control over the ruled race by limiting their rights, freedom, and access to basic resources such as health care, education, employment, and housing (Jonnalagadda, et al., 2015). This painful and agonizing reality began with slavery and has continued through legal segregation to the present day (Feagin, 2006).

For more than two centuries, Afro-Americans had been enslaved in order to produce millions of White's wealth (Feagin, 2006: xi). For centuries African-American were treated as something less than human. White Americans thought of them as nothing more than a savage or a beast. Soderlund (2005: 55) says that the White people tendency to exploit Africans as slaves was rooted from ethnocentrism, hierarchical beliefs, and prejudice against blackness. During the slavery era, Afro-Americans had to face many acts of violence done by the White slaveholders. They labored before dawn until dark, with whips and chains, under the Whites' control (Feagin, 2006: 23).

Racial oppression combines prejudice with institutional power which creates a system that discriminates Black Americans as the “target group” and benefits Whites as the “dominant group” (Feagin, 2006). Afro-American was considered as the minority race in America, while the Caucasian dominated the country. Schaefer (2008: 39) states that White colonialism demanded Black Africans perceived White as more superior and intelligent, while Blacks were defined as lazy, unintelligent, and incompetent. Moreover, compare to Afro-American citizens, White have more economic, sociological and political power (Spector, 2014: 126). Because of this domination in every aspect, White Americans became more powerful, and possessed a sense of superiority. Therefore, they intended to oppress the minority group to maintain the status quo. This resulted in the privilege to the White Americans. Allen (2014) argues that racial oppression is designed to deny, disregard, delegitimize a certain social group, in which makes their status beneath the oppressor group. During the segregation era, for instance, White Americans prevented Blacks from having equal rights, freedom, and access to decent housing, education and employment (Schaefer, 2008). Racial oppression brought nothing but suffering to African-American, both physically and mentally (Feagin, 2006).

Despite the pain that they had to endure, African American continuously showed resistance to racial inequality (Wallenfeld, 2011b). Through abolition, rebellion, and Civil Right Movement, Afro-Americans fight for their right as a human being as well as American citizen. Blakemore (2019) notes that between 17th and 19th centuries, there are hundreds of revolts done

by enslaved Africans. Even in the post-slavery era, United States remained a place dominated by race hatred and oppression toward African American. Thus, Black Americans had to extend their fight through The Civil Rights Movement which spanned for approximately 25 years.

Since a person with African descent are always put in secondary position throughout their live, all efforts done by Afro-American creative writers are considered to be a form of protest (Harris, 2000). Bay (2000) states that some of African American's revolts were done using literature, where works produced often consists of petitions, protests, and artistic reproductions designed to draw White attention to racial injustice. Protest literature is one of many practices that African-Americans used with the intention to show inequalities among races and socio-economic groups in America, and to encourage a change within the society that engenders such inequalities (Harris, 2000: 1). One of the literature genres that the oppressed racial group used in order to discuss racial oppression issue is poetry (Harris, 2000). Thus, Poetry can be used as a tool for a change, as well as to influence people.

Paul Laurence Dunbar and Amiri Baraka are one of the two African American poets whose works portray the secondary status of Black people in United States of America. Being born as Afro-American and experienced the racial oppression, both poets use their poems as a weapon to fight against injustice that befell them. Frederick Douglass – a former slave who gained a political and literary prominence in America called Dunbar as "the most promising young colored man in America (Poetry Foundation, 2014)."

Meanwhile, Joyce Pettis in her book praised Baraka's work as an institution building that bridging the gap between the arts and the people, he also managed to use arts as catalysts to arouse the Black cultural pride (2002: 21). The two poets were lived in two different eras. However, their poems commonly talk about the same issue – racial oppression face by Afro-American. Through the use of figurative language in their poems, Dunbar and Baraka portray African American pain and suffering caused by the racial oppression.

By using Roland Barthes' semiotic, the interpretation of the meaning in poetry can be done through the examination of the dictions as well as the figure of speech used in the poem. In Barthes' semiotic theory, the process of signs reading is being broken down and focused on their interpretation by different cultures and societies (Chandler, 2007). This interpretation can be strengthen by juxtaposing the meaning with socio-cultural background of the poems. Wellek and Warren (1993) says that there are three classifications of sociological approach. First, the writer sociology which focuses on the social background of the writer. Second is by looking at the context of their literary works. While the last one focuses on the reader problem and social impact of literary work. Hence, the combination of Roland Barthes' semiotic with sociological approach in literature will give an in-depth analysis of Afro-American racial oppression in Paul Laurence Dunbar and Amiri Baraka's poems.

Several studies about racism and discrimination in literary works have been done by some researchers. Kartika et al. (2017) in "Racial Oppression

against African American Slaves in Harriette Gillem Robinet's *Forty Acres and Maybe a Mule*" examines how Black characters in the novel had to deal with racial oppression during the slavery era. Six features of Feagin's Systemic Racism were applied in order to explain how systemic racism worked and related to White economic domination. This researcher found that oppression led to stereotyping, prejudicing, and marginalizing of those who targeted by it. Pascal and his family received many unequal treatments. They were whipped all the time, separated from their family, discriminated, and never gained their rights to forty acres of farm. As a powerless race who lived under the White domination, Pascal and his family could not do anything even though White people had oppressed them harshly. This reinforces the superiority of Whites as the powerful oppressors, and the inferiority of Blacks as the oppressed group.

The study with similar topic can also be found in "Racism and Sexism: A Postcolonial Study of the *Bluest Eye*." In this study, Gulia et al. (2016) focuses on how Black women in the novel faced the reality of double discrimination of both race and sex. By employing Postcolonial theory which addresses matters of identity, gender, race, racism and ethnicity, the authors argue that *The Bluest Eye* represents how Black women suffer from an institutionalized dehumanization in the context of race, gender, and class in American society. Morrison has described the world wide gender disparity through her characters like Pecola, Frieda, Pauline and the narrator – Claudia. In *The Bluest Eye*, Gulia et al. (2016) notes that these three characters' lives

have greatly been affected by three things: being a child, being Black and being a girl. All the women characters in the novel were abused by either White women and men, and not to mention by Black men.

Additionally, there are studies that use Paul Laurence Dunbar and Amiri Baraka's works as the corpus of the research. Ronda (2012) in "Work and Wait Unwearying': Dunbar's Georgics," focuses her study on Dunbar's georgic poems from *Lyrics of Lowly Life* (1896). Georgic poem refers to poems which deal with agriculture or rural topic, and taking the laborer as its central protagonist (Lilly, 1919, as cited in Ronda, 2012). In her research, Ronda (2012) argues that racial constraint is vividly presented in Dunbar's portrayals of labor and that these georgic contemplations represent his sharp thinking about the hardships of African American life in the post-Reconstruction era. Further, by highlighting its georgic strain, she argues that Dunbar's poetry understate "romantic portrayals of poetic enslavement" in favor of "an examination of labor's tragic, non-redemptive nature" (Ronda, 2012: 864), since for African Americans at the end of 19th, life is work – difficult, necessary, and often without reward.

In addition, Gould (2019) in "Justice Deferred: Legal Duplicity and the Scapegoat Mentality in Paul Laurence Dunbar's Jim Crow America" explores the diverge that Dunbar noticed between the law as an instrument of justice and the law as a tool to maintain the segregationist' status quo in Jim Crow America. This study focuses on four Dunbar's short stories, and one of his novels – *The Sport of the Gods* (1902). By using scapegoat theory, Gould

(2019) juxtaposes a right-based discourse premised on legal equality with the actual reality of social segregation in each text. She found that Dunbar – through the characters as well as prose narratives – exposes the injustice happened during the segregation era. Dunbar’s treatment of lynching, for instance, is considered as a manifestation of the scapegoat mechanism in which the innocent are punished for the crimes of the guilty, and society demand their sacrifice to redeem its guilt.

Meanwhile, in a journal article written by Jindal et al. (2015) entitled “Theme of Resistance in the Selected Poems of Amiri Baraka,” the author traces the theme of resistance towards racism in Amiri Baraka’s selected poems. The authors analyze how Baraka in his poetry looks for ways of destroying the dominant ideologies of the White world. Resistance against hegemonic representation, ideology, values which marginalize the individuals on the basis of race are portrayed in Baraka’s poems. He is continuously confronting the surrounding Eurocentric White culture. Through his poems, Baraka urges Blacks to acquire political strength, and make an attempt to end discrimination. In his opinion, the unfortunate situation that Blacks had to face would not change unless the community took direct action. Thus, Blacks ought to do whatever it takes to end their segregation and discrimination, even if they had to use violence to achieve that. Baraka also argues that freedom is not given but rather won.

Other research which explores the theme of racial discrimination toward Black Americans in Baraka’s work is written under the title

“Marginality and Social Rejection in Amiri Baraka’s *Slave Ship*.” Abed (2016) found that the idea of America as a democratic and freedom state is not true as seen from Baraka’s perspective. Baraka views American society as lack of love, friendship, intimacy, and mercy, thus the tension between Blacks and Whites grows. Through *Slave Ship*, he depicts this miserable reality so that viewers aware of what happen in their society. This study also found that Baraka’s play is a critic against the capitalist America. Through his play, Baraka desires to find an adequate social fairness for the oppressed black Americans. He also encourages Blacks to be proud of their African roots, and to fight against the inferiority and marginality.

From the previous studies above, none of the studies explore the issue of Afro-American racial oppression in poetry, especially poems written in two different eras. Therefore, the researcher aims to analyze Afro-American racial oppression in Paul Laurence Dunbar and Amiri Baraka’s poems, and see the difference on how both poets portray the issue. Dunbar and Baraka lived in two distinct periods. Dunbar lived during the 1800s precisely in the post-Reconstruction era where Jim Crow began to govern American society, while Baraka’s works mostly written during the 1950s-1960s where Civil Right Movement reach its peak up to the abolition of segregation law. However, their works mostly talk about the same matter – racial oppression towards Afro-American in United States. By choosing both poets who lived years apart, the researcher hopes to provide an in-depth analysis of the topic since racial oppression itself is an ongoing struggle for African American community.

1.2 Research Questions

By choosing poems from two different poets, the researcher intends to provide an in-depth analysis of the research questions as follow:

- 1) What signs are used in Paul Laurence Dunbar and Amiri Baraka's poems in portraying Afro-American racial oppression?
- 2) How is Afro-American racial oppression portrayed in Paul Laurence Dunbar and Amiri Baraka's poems?

1.3 Objectives of the Study

Based on research questions above, the objectives of the study are presented below:

- 1) To find out the signs portraying Afro-American racial oppression in Paul Laurence Dunbar and Amiri Baraka's poems.
- 2) To explore Afro-American racial oppression in Paul Laurence Dunbar and Amiri Baraka's poems.

1.4 Significance of the Study

The result of this study is expected to be useful for the readers, and those who are interested in doing literary research. Below are the significance of the study theoretically and practically:

- 1) Theoretically

The researcher hopes that this research can contribute to the literary study, particularly poetry. Therefore, this study can be used as a reference for those who want to explore a similar topic.

2) Practically

Hopefully, this study can help the readers to gain a better knowledge about racial oppression in United States of America. By reading this research, they will come to a new understanding of African-Americans' struggle as well as their perceptions, feeling, and thought of racial oppression. Moreover, those who read this research would be aware that reading and understanding literary works does not only bring joy, but also a deeper and broader knowledge about the real-world situation.

