CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background of The Study

As one of the series that carries a feminist message, "Lessons in Chemistry," based on the bestselling novel of the same name and released in October 2023, successfully won nomination for Best TV Series at the Women Film Critics Circle Awards 2023 and received nominations for Best Limited Series at the Critics' Choice Awards and also Golden Globe Awards in 2024. Set in early 1950s America, the series depicts a male-dominated society where sexism and gender stereotypes are deeply entrenched. On Rotten Tomatoes, the series earned a rating of 86% with a score of 7.30 out of 10. Reviews state that "Lessons in Chemistry" is an aspirational fairytale with a strong feminist message. Thus, "Lessons in Chemistry" is one of the literary works that reflects and raises audience awareness about societal issues, including gender inequality like sexism.

Sexism is described as the belief that one gender or sex is superior, more valued, or more competent than the other. While sexism can affect both men and women, it is undeniable that sexism primarily affects women (Mufarida, 2020). This is shown by prejudices, such as women are weaker creatures than men, leaders must come from men and these prejudices have existed since ancient times where patriarchy in society is still upheld.

A series of prejudices like these allow men to act to control women and in the end it is women who are negatively affected. Women are always seen as the

second or lower creature, whereas men are superior to women in every manner. Considered as inferior, women are often treated differently than men in a negative way. Women often experience discrimination, aligning with Natasha Walter's assertion in "Living Dolls: The Return of Sexism," where she defines sexism as "discrimination against other people based on their gender, mostly women" (Walter, 2011). This makes women more vulnerable to suffering due to sexist behavior.

Sexist behavior manifests not only through actions but also in the form of words or language, which is commonly referred to as sexist language. Language serves as a guide to help individuals more clearly understand the social reality since language is a mirror that reflects the social reality including the phenomenon of sexism. Sexist language demonstrates how one sex or gender is treated in a biased manner in comparison to another sex through language. When people use pronouns that refer to only one gender while ignoring the other, even when referring to both women and men, they demonstrate a bias (Stout & Dasgupta, 2011). This statement is supported by Weatherall which states that using gender-specific terms to refer to people in general or to an unspecified person has long been criticized as a sexist practice (Weatherall, 2002). This is also what we call androcentric language.

Feminists and linguists dissect and study language, which is essentially androcentric, to discover how it affects our lives and how it has to be reformed. The example of androcentrism in language is in the English language. English is a language that reflects gender differences, for example its nouns and pronouns as in

generic use of the masculine pronoun when speaking about a population that also included females, such as 'mankind', despite there being more appropriate terms of use, such as 'humankind' and 'people'. This demonstrates how language is used to marginalize women by assigning them second-class status and making women invisible in language.

Weatherall (2002) defines sexist language as "a language that ignores women; language that defines women narrowly; and language that depreciates women". Sara Mills states that a statement is considered as sexist when they stem from the belief that any activity linked to women is trivial or less important than those associated with men (Mills, 2008). Language that is sexist encodes attitudes toward men and women. It also includes stereotypical ideas or beliefs toward both men and women. Sexist language contributes to the reinforcement and construction of gender stereotypes within society. Gender stereotypes refer to beliefs about the traits and activities deemed appropriate for men and women (Brannon, 2016). This belief is associated not only with the typical behavior of men and women in a society but also their physical appearances, occupations, and traits (Brannon, 2016). However, as previously said, sexist language and gender stereotypes primarily affect women. It is a prejudice in favor of men over women, resulting in more negative assessments of women.

As of right now, sexism and sexist language remain social phenomena in our society. Thus, by understanding sexist language, we can akcnowledge the social constructs within language, challenge existing gender stereotypes, and promote for gender equality in communication. Previous studies have analyzed sexist language

in various literary works. Noh & Laili (2022) investigated sexist language in the main characters of "Mrs. Dalloway" using Sara Mills' theory through critical discourse analysis. They identified four types of overt sexism such as naming,dictionaries, generic pronouns and nouns, and non-parallel words and two types of indirect sexism such as assumptions and metaphor in the novel.

The study on sexist language was also carried out by Nwaenyi, Chinyelu (2020) using Sara Mills' (2008) model as its theoretical foundation. In three Nollywood movies, sexist language is examined in this article. The findings shows that the sexist language used by the characters in these films includes overt sexism of generic nouns, compound words, naming and non-parallel terms, and insult terms. This study also discovered that male characters dominate the use of overt sexism in these movies.

The other study that discussed sexist language in the same movie of this topic study is conducted by Mayoriska, U., Febrianti, Y., & Widodo, H. W (2022). This study uses qualitative descriptive methods to investigate the use of sexism in languages and the reasons why the characters in the film Colette uttered it. It is based on Sara Mills' theory and Ann Weatherall's theory of Language, Gender, and Discourse. The result is the Colette movie contains six categories of overt sexism: naming, dictionaries, generic nouns, insult phrases for women, semantic derogation, and sexism in name and title. There are also four types of indirect sexism in humor, presumption, metaphor, and collocation. Both male and female characters use sexist language to demonstrate superiority as a result of rendering women invisible, to express anxiety about their status as a result of society's

restricted definition of women, and to highlight one's position as women are always devalued by society's prejudice.

Despite numerous studies on sexism in literary works, there is limited studies on sexist language in "Lessons in Chemistry." Also there is no other study that uses *Lesson In Chemistry* as their source of data by the time this study is presented. Previous studies often focused solely on the forms of sexism or sexist language, but this study aims to analyze both sexist language and gender stereotypes in "Lessons in Chemistry." *Lessons in Chemistry* is an interesting series for the writer because it addresses the issue of sexism.

The series is based on the novel of the same title published in 2022 by Bornie Garmus, a writer who grew up in Southern Califonia. Garmus was inspired to write this book, which later became a bestseller and was adapted into a series, by the sexism she encountered in her life. She wrote this "feminist" novel to challenge the anti-female bias that is ingrained in culture and society to the present day and thus needs to be exposed (Rosseinsky, 2023). Literary works can contain the author's thoughts, experiences, ideas, feelings, beliefs, and expressions in tangible shape and language (Lowenthal, 2017). Literature is not only a reflection of society but also acts as a curative mirror for members of society so they can look at themselves and seek the requirements for improvement (Akhter, 2022).

Both the book and the series are set in 1960s Southern America, given this setting, the author wants to reminisce and demonstrate not to become complacent about the progress women have made since the 1960s, as it's all too easy for that progress to be taken away. This relates to the Supreme Court overturning Roe v.

Wade in 2022, the same year "Lessons in Chemistry" was published (Rosseinsky, 2023). Roe v. Wade was the right to an abortion and granted women the right to choose under a constitutional framework, which had been upheld for decades in the United States, specifically in the 1970s, it is the idea for US women to have control over their own bodies.

In the 1960s and 1970s, second-wave feminism spread across the country, with large groups advocating for women's equality. This movement fought for women's liberation, workplace equality, reproductive rights, and sexual freedom. The abortion rights movement was a critical element of second-wave feminism and women's equality (Paxton & Hughes in Adkins, 2017). With the overturning of Roe v Wade, Lessons in Chemistry's portrait of a world where women are treated as second-class citizens feels especially relevant.

Considering this, *Lessons in Chemistry* stands as a feminist literary work that vividly portrays pervasive sexism and stereotypes faced by women in the US in the 1960s workplace through the representation of the main female character in both the book and the series. However, in the series, the main character's life is depicted as even worse. It tells the story of Elizabeth Zott, whose dream of being a scientist is obstructed by the patriarchal society in which she lives. She faces every sexist cliche in her workplace: being called "honey" or "sweetheart," asked to make coffee, told to smile, and mistaken for a secretary at the Hastings Institute, where she works. Additionally, Elizabeth, who is pregnant, becomes increasingly marginalized. She is fired, struggles to find income, and is unable to work at the company despite her brilliance.

The series intensifies the toxic workplace environment to convey its message faster than the book. In the novel, Elizabeth faces discrimination, is held back by her sexist boss, and is fired for pregnancy, but she is at least a chemist. In the series, she is only a lab technician, having failed to pursue her doctoral degree due to sexual harassment by a senior. Additionally, there are sexist plot devices that aren't even present in the book that also show up in the series, such as her being required to enter the Miss Hastings Pageant, which makes it even worse for her to receive sexist treatment and utterances from her male colleagues. Thus, the sexism experienced by the main character captured in the series' storylines has more attracted the writer's attention.

Sara Mills' (2008) theory on Language and Sexism, which divides sexism into overt and indirect forms, will be used to investigate the kinds of sexist language. This theory is chosen for its feminist perspective and suitability for analyzing sexist language in the series. Deaux and Lewis's theory of gender stereotypes (1984) will be used to categorize gender stereotypes across various dimensions such as traits, behaviors, physical characteristics, and occupations.%

1.2 Research Questions

Based on the background of the study, this study intended to identify these following questions:

1. What are the types of sexist language found in the *Lessons In Chemistry*?

2. How gender stereotypes are revealed through the use of sexist language in *Lessons in Chemistry*?

1.3 Purpose of The Study

Related to the the research questions, the purpose of this study are:

1. This study aims at identifying what types of sexist language used by the characters in the series.

2. The study aims at describing gender stereotypes that are revealed through the use of sexist language in the series.

1.4 Scope of The Study

The scope of this study is limited to manuscripts of the *Lessons in Chemistry* series from episodes one to eight. This study focuses on describing linguistic phenomena. This study will identify and describe types of sexist language used by the characters in the *Lessons In Chemistry* series. Furthermore, it discusses the gender stereotypes revealed through the use of sexist language such as how it expresses negative stereotypes to women. The study's data are collected through series and dialogue script examining to understand the context situation of the series. The sexist language discussed based on Language and Sexism theory by Sara Mills (2008) which divides sexist language into overt sexism and indirect sexism, while the gender stereotypes categorize based on Gender Stereotypes theory by Deaux & Lewis (1984).

1.5 Significance of The Study

The finding of the study is expected to be useful for:

1. Theoretically, the study aimed to explain the prejudices or stereotypes of the patriarchal culture that shapes the image and relationship between men and women which is reflected in literary works.

2. Practically, the study is intended for students and readers who want to broaden their understanding of sexist language in movies or series as well as to raise their awareness about sexist language that can still be found in society. This study is also expected to provide additional information to researchers who are interested in conducting similar studies and lastly the study is expected to enrich literary studies and increase public appreciation of literary works.