

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background of the Study

Racism is the belief that humans are divided into different groups based on their social behavior and natural abilities, which then allows people to rank them as “superior” or “inferior” (Newman, 2020). Within the framework of Black Feminism, racism is not seen as a single phenomenon, but rather as part of a broader social order. Patricia Hill Collins (2000) asserts that racism often operates in conjunction with sexism and classism in a system she calls the “matrix of domination.” Collins (2000) argues that this type of oppression is interlocking, where “each group faces a different set of challenges depending on their position within the power structure” (Collins, 2000). For Black women, this means they have to fight against many unfair labels at once to define their own true identity

In the United States, racism still affects how Black people live within different institutions (Pew Research Center, 2024). The setting of the novel, Brooklyn, shows the real-life problems in modern America. In many parts of Brooklyn, there is a big gap between different social classes. According to Shepard (2013), Brooklyn is a place where “uneven development” and “gentrification” happen. This means that while some areas become very expensive and fancy, the people who have lived there for a long time, especially from marginalized groups, are often pushed out or ignored. This creates a clear wall between people with money, like Genevieve’s family, and those who are struggling, like Marisol.

In the novel *(S)Kin*, this setting creates many layers of challenges for the characters. They do not only face racial discrimination but also the fear of being undocumented immigrants. As seen in reports from the Migration Policy Institute (2017), people in this position often face economic problems and are strictly watched by the immigration system. In this story, this difficult environment is what the female characters must navigate to survive.

Furthermore, these problems are part of a bigger system in the United States. Bonilla-Silva (1997) explains that racism in America is not just about individuals being mean to each other, but it is built into the social structure. This “racialized social system” makes life much harder for Black women and immigrants. For someone like Marisol, who is an undocumented immigrant, the challenge is even bigger because she faces “classism.” Classism is a way of treating people from lower social classes as if they are less important (Langhout et al., 2007). By looking at these real conditions in Brooklyn and the U.S., the story of *(S)Kin* is not just fiction, but a reflection of the systemic barriers that many people still face today.

The struggle against these interlocking systems is personified through the character of Marisol. Living as an undocumented immigrant in a struggling neighborhood, Marisol’s life is defined by the harsh realities of poverty and constant fear. Her experience represents the “structural domain of power” (Collins, 2000), where lack of legal status and economic resources limit her movement and safety. Marisol must navigate a world that views her through the lens of classism and racial prejudice, forcing her to find ways to survive while being marginalized by the very institutions meant to protect her. Her story

highlights the vulnerability of Black women who exist at the lowest levels of the social hierarchy.

Although often associated with lower-class environments, racism actually penetrates elite and upper-middle-class institutions through more subtle yet oppressive forms. Findings from the Pew Research Center (2024) indicate that racial discrimination continues to color the experiences of Black people even within institutions considered progressive or scholarly. This reflects the experience of Genevieve in the novel *(S)Kin*. As the daughter of a highly educated doctor, Genevieve lives in an elite environment and attends a predominantly white private institution. However, instead of receiving protection, she faces oppression in the form of forced assimilation from her own father, Daniel, who attempts to “cure” her cultural identity through the logic of Western science. Just as racism in elite environments often forces individuals to abandon their cultural roots in order to be accepted socially, Genevieve feels that her existence as a Black woman is constantly compromised by standards of beauty and normalcy imposed by patriarchal and Eurocentric perspectives.

In the context of Black women’s lives, racism is not a standalone phenomenon, but rather an integral part of a broader system of oppression. Patricia Hill Collins (2000) explains that this oppression operates on multiple intersecting levels, forcing individuals to continually negotiate their existence. In *(S)Kin*, navigating this oppression is clearly visible through the contrasting experiences of Marisol and Genevieve. Although both share the same cultural roots, they face different forms of oppression due to their social positions. For Marisol, this oppression is very real and fundamental, related to physical and

economic survival. In contrast, for Genevieve, this oppression operates through mental and emotional control that forces her to conform to white standards of living. This demonstrates that the system of oppression does not always operate uniformly, it adapts to each individual's class position and social access, but still serves the same purpose, that is to maintain patriarchal and racial domination.

To understand the complexity of the oppression experienced by Marisol and Genevieve, this study utilizes four domains of power within the Matrix of Domination (Collins, 2000). First, the structural domain is seen in how American immigration laws marginalize Marisol, while the elite education system excludes Genevieve's authentic identity. Second, the disciplinary domain emerges through the strict rules in Daniel's home that attempt to control the girls' behavior and bodies. Third, the hegemonic domain operates through the propagation of the ideology that Western beauty and knowledge are superior to Haitian cultural heritage, a notion that deeply oppresses Genevieve. Finally, the interpersonal domain occurs in everyday interactions, where Daniel actively manipulates family relationships to maintain his control. By examining these four domains, it is clear that Marisol and Genevieve's navigation is an attempt to break down the walls of oppression that surround them from various angles, both institutionally and personally.

Women's empowerment in oppressed situations is not simply an attempt to seek comfort, but rather a form of struggle or struggle of resistance (Demirović, 2017). In the novel *(S)Kin*, both Marisol and Genevieve demonstrate this empowerment effort in different ways. Marisol empowers herself by maintaining her Haitian cultural roots amidst economic marginalization, while Genevieve

struggles against the limitations of gender roles in a patriarchal society that try to dictate her body and behavior (Collins, 2000). However, the process of “navigation” they undertake proves that systemic oppression always triggers the emergence of new forms of resistance from within the women themselves.

Individual empowerment reaches its peak when it transforms into collective power through sisterhood. The concept of sisterhood is not merely an emotional connection, but a political strategy for confronting collective oppression (Horzella, 2020). Within Collins’s (2000) framework, sisterhood provides “safe spaces” where Black women can share their experiences without external judgment. The collaboration between Marisol and Genevieve in this novel demonstrates that “confiding” or sharing secrets is not simply ordinary communication, but rather a way for them to build a collective consciousness to break down the walls of the Matrix of Domination. Through this sisterhood, they transcend the isolation created by Daniel, transforming individual suffering into a force of resistance that allows them to challenge power structures that previously seemed impenetrable.

The term “navigating,” as used in this study, refers to the active, ongoing process through which women move through, around, and against systems of oppression in order to survive and ultimately achieve empowerment. This concept draws from Demirović’s (2017) notion of struggle, which positions women’s empowerment not as a passive state of comfort but as a continuous form of resistance against the forces that seek to contain them. In alignment with this, Collins (2000) suggested that women who exist within the matrix of domination do not simply endure oppression, but they actively negotiate it through the

construction of self-knowledge, the building of relationships with other women, and the reclaiming of their own cultural identity. Navigating, therefore, is neither escape nor surrender, but it is the deliberate act of moving through oppression while simultaneously working to dismantle it from within. In the context of this study, the navigation undertaken by Marisol and Genevieve encompasses both their individual journeys toward self-definition and their collective resistance through sisterhood, making it a concept that bridges the personal and the political dimensions of women's struggle.

It is important to distinguish navigating from other responses to oppression. Navigating is not escape, it does not require women to leave the system entirely or to find a space outside of oppression. It is also not surrender and it does not involve the acceptance of oppressive conditions as inevitable or deserved. And it is not simply endurance and it is not a passive act of surviving without resistance. Rather, navigating is an active process that operates simultaneously on multiple levels, the individual level, through the construction of self-knowledge and the reclaiming of identity, the relational level, through the building of bonds between women that affirm their humanity and shared struggle, and the cultural level, through the reclamation of traditions, stories, and practices that dominant culture has sought to erase. In the context of *(S)Kin*, the navigation undertaken by Marisol and Genevieve reflects all three of these levels, making it a concept that bridges the personal and the political, the individual and the collective, and the local and the ancestral dimensions of women's resistance.

The dynamics of this identity struggle are emotionally portrayed in Ibi Zoboi's novel *(S)Kin*. The story focuses on two sisters, Genevieve and Marisol,

separated by social class and distance but united by a shared magical heritage. Genevieve lives with her father, Daniel, a doctor obsessed with “curing” Genevieve’s skin condition, which he believes is an illness but is actually a sign of a magical transformation into a *Soucouyant*. Marisol, on the other hand, lives in the shadows as an unacknowledged immigrant, struggling to maintain family secrets while navigating the hardships of life in Brooklyn. Conflict culminates when the sisters realize that to break free from Daniel’s control and oppressive social expectations, they must collaborate. Through a blend of magical realism and sociopolitical issues, the novel depicts how navigating oppression is not only accomplished through physical escape, but through sisterly solidarity that allows them to redefine who they are in the face of a world that seeks to limit them.

The selection of *(S)Kin* as the research object is based on its significance in contemporary literary discourse. Since its release in February 2025 by HarperCollins/Versify, the novel has received widespread acclaim, including being selected as a 2025 National Book Award Finalist for Young People’s Literature and a 2026 NAACP Image Award nomination for Outstanding Literary Work (ibizoboi.net). Beyond these formal achievements, the urgency of this research lies in Ibi Zoboi’s way of framing issues of racism and colorism through the lens of a unique fantasy novel-in-verse. The novel received six starred reviews and was recognized as a Junior Library Guild Gold Standard Selection, signifying its narrative quality in exploring complex themes such as immigrant identity and inherited magic. By analyzing this highly acclaimed work, the research is expected to contribute to an understanding of how young adult fiction can serve as

a medium for incisive social critique of systems of oppression in the United States.

Ibi Zoboi is a New York Times bestselling author known for her outspoken advocacy of the Black experience through works such as *American Street* and *Nigeria Jones* (Coretta Scott King Award 2024). Born in Haiti and raised in New York City, Zoboi brings her personal immigrant background to the narrative of *(S)kin*. In an interview, Zoboi revealed that the inspiration for the novel stemmed from a desire to incorporate Caribbean folklore into a modern context, while also reflecting the mother-daughter dynamics of an immigrant family attempting upward mobility in a new country (Publishers Weekly, 2025). Zoboi consciously explores colorism, featurism, and texturism which are the terms she observed firsthand during her school years in America to demonstrate that racial dynamics extend beyond the Black-White divide, but also extend into the class hierarchy within the community itself (The Nerd Daily, 2025). The author's personal closeness to the issues of the Haitian diaspora makes this novel an authentic cultural document, where the struggle of the characters Marisol and Genevieve to "shed their skin" is a metaphor for Zoboi's own efforts to identify feelings of longing, anger, and the desire to have a complete identity.

The issue of women's oppression and resistance in Ibi Zoboi's novel *(S)kin* can be analyzed by applying Patricia Hill Collins's Matrix of Domination and Self-Definition theory. Collins (2000) stated that the intersecting oppression of women creates an interconnected relationship that she calls the Matrix of Domination. This concept is a form of oppression that intersects race, class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, nation, and religion that is regulated through four

domains of power, structural, disciplinary, hegemonic, and interpersonal. The structural domain of power relates to the dominance of social institutions that place women in subordinate positions in society. The disciplinary domain of power relies on bureaucratic hierarchies and surveillance techniques to manage this domination. The hegemonic domain of power relates to ideology, culture, and consciousness that manipulate ideas, images, symbols, and cultural symbols to shape certain mindsets. Finally, the interpersonal domain of power addresses everyday social interactions that regulate the practices of how people treat each other (Collins, 2000). In this novel, these four domains will be used to dissect how the lives of Marisol and Genevieve are being controlled.

Collins (2000) stated that women's awareness to fight for freedom and overcome the matrix of domination is manifested through a term she calls Self-Definition. Self-Definition is designed to counter controlling images and oppose discriminatory practices against women. The construction of self-knowledge is crucial for women's empowerment because it supports them in rejecting the dominant ideology that oppresses them (Collins, 2000). Women gather their strength to fight for freedom through self-knowledge constructed through three safe spaces, namely relationships between women (women's relationship with another), artistic traditions, and women's writings (Collins, 2000). These safe spaces are crucial for women to recognize self-valuation and respect, self-reliance and independence, and personal empowerment that help them empower themselves to fight against this oppression (Collins, 2000). In the context of *(S)kin*, the sisterhood between Marisol and Genevieve becomes the primary safe

space in which they build the strength to transform and empower their identities as *Soucouyant*.

There have been several studies that discussed similar issues regarding women's oppression and their resistance. One of the past related studies that examined the intersectionality of oppression and women's struggle for empowerment is a study conducted by Nahed E. Eissa (2025). This research explores the experiences of Black women in the United States through a journal article titled "*The Intersectionality of Race, Class and Gender, and the Matrix of Domination in Angie Thomas's On the Come Up (2019)*". By deploying Patricia Hill Collins's theory of the Matrix of Domination, this study discovers how race, class, and gender overlap to shape the life of the protagonist, Brianna Jackson. Eissa finds that Brianna's journey is not just about her career, but also about her struggle for self-definition against the "controlling images" created by society. The study concludes that family and community support play a vital role in helping Brianna achieve empowerment.

The other past related study that discusses women's empowerment towards the matrix of domination is a research titled "*The Quest for Self-Determination and Individuality: A Black Feminist Analysis of Walker's The Color Purple*". Conducted by Sheema et al. (2025), this study is aimed to explore the emancipation of the main character, Celie, in Alice Walker's famous novel. By using Patricia Hill Collins's theory, this study examines how Celie navigates the matrix of domination which includes racism, patriarchy, and poverty. The researchers find that Celie experiences domestic violence and "psychological silencing," but she eventually finds her voice through the help of sisterhood and

solidarity with other women. This study emphasizes that creative expression and personal transformation are important tools for Black women to find their freedom.

These two previous studies provide valuable insights into how the Matrix of Domination and Self-Definition operate in literature. However, this research on Ibi Zoboi's *(S)Kin* is different. First, while the previous studies analyze realistic novels, this study explores how magical realism and folklore (*the Soucouyant*) are used as tools for empowerment. Second, this study focuses on the specific contrast between two characters from different social classes, Genevieve, who comes from an elite background, and Marisol, who comes from a lower-class background. By doing this, the researcher provides a fresh perspective on how the matrix of domination affects Black women in a contemporary setting.

Even though those two previous studies have analyzed novels using the Matrix of Domination concept, there is still a gap in how the concept is reconstructed in a fantasy setting. This research fills that gap by examining how Black feminist oppression is reworked through the lens of Caribbean folklore, specifically the *Soucouyant*, which turns traditional stories into a modern tool for resistance. It should be noted that while *(S)Kin* is a novel-in-verse, this study does not engage with its poetic form or literary devices. The analysis is concerned with the narrative and thematic content of the text, reading it as a story about oppression and empowerment rather than as a piece of poetry. Furthermore, this study offers a fresh perspective by showing how the sharp class contrasts between Marisol, who is a struggling immigrant, and Genevieve, who comes from an elite family that make the experience of Black womanhood more complex. By doing

this, the research provides a better understanding of how systemic oppression and empowerment work through both magical metaphors and real-life social status.

1.2 Research Question

How do women navigate the oppression to achieve empowerment in Ibi Zoboi's *(S)Kin*?

1.3 Purpose of the Study

This study is aimed to examine how women navigate the oppression to achieve empowerment in Ibi Zoboi's *(S)Kin*.

1.4 Scope of the Study

This study limits the analysis to the narrations and dialogues found in the novel *(S)Kin* by Ibi Zoboi. It is important to note that although *(S)Kin* is written in the form of a novel-in-verse, this study does not analyze its poetic elements such as meter, rhyme scheme, line breaks, or other formal literary devices. The focus is placed entirely on the narrative content and social context of the text, specifically the experiences, relationships, and ideological conditions that shape the female characters' lives. Selected narrations and dialogues will be analyzed to show how Marisol and Genevieve are oppressed and how their navigation through self-definition helps them achieve empowerment. This study focuses on the application of the Matrix of Domination and Self-Definition theories to the literary construction of characters and their internal struggles within the text.

1.5 Significance of the Study

This study will help develop Black Feminist Thought by showing how the Matrix of Domination and Self-Definition are reworked in a fantasy narrative context. Since the analysis focuses on the narrative and thematic dimensions of *(S)Kin* rather than its verse form, it demonstrates that Black feminist frameworks can be productively applied to non-realist and genre fiction without requiring engagement with poetic technique. It will provide a new way to understand how folklore can be used as a tool for resistance within literary narratives. Additionally, it will add to the discussion on intersectionality by showing that the experiences faced by Black women are not all the same, but deeply shaped by class differences, colorism, and immigration status.

1.6 State of Art

This study uses Patricia Hill Collins's Black Feminist perspective to analyze the journey of the female characters in navigating oppression in *(S)Kin*. While many studies have applied the matrix of domination in various contexts, its application to the specific character development and narrative structure of this contemporary novel remains limited. Although *(S)Kin* is written as a novel-in-verse, this study does not analyze its formal poetic properties. Instead, it treats the text as a narrative, focusing on how the characters' experiences, voices, and relationships carry the ideological and social dimensions that Collins's theory is equipped to address. In addition, this study applies the Matrix of Domination and Self-Definition theories to explore the depth of the characters' empowerment, with a particular focus on how the *Soucouyant* folklore functions as a literary

vehicle for transformation and resistance. This research contributes to the development of literary criticism that explores the intersection of fantasy elements and systemic oppression, demonstrating that genre fiction can be a serious site of Black feminist analysis.

