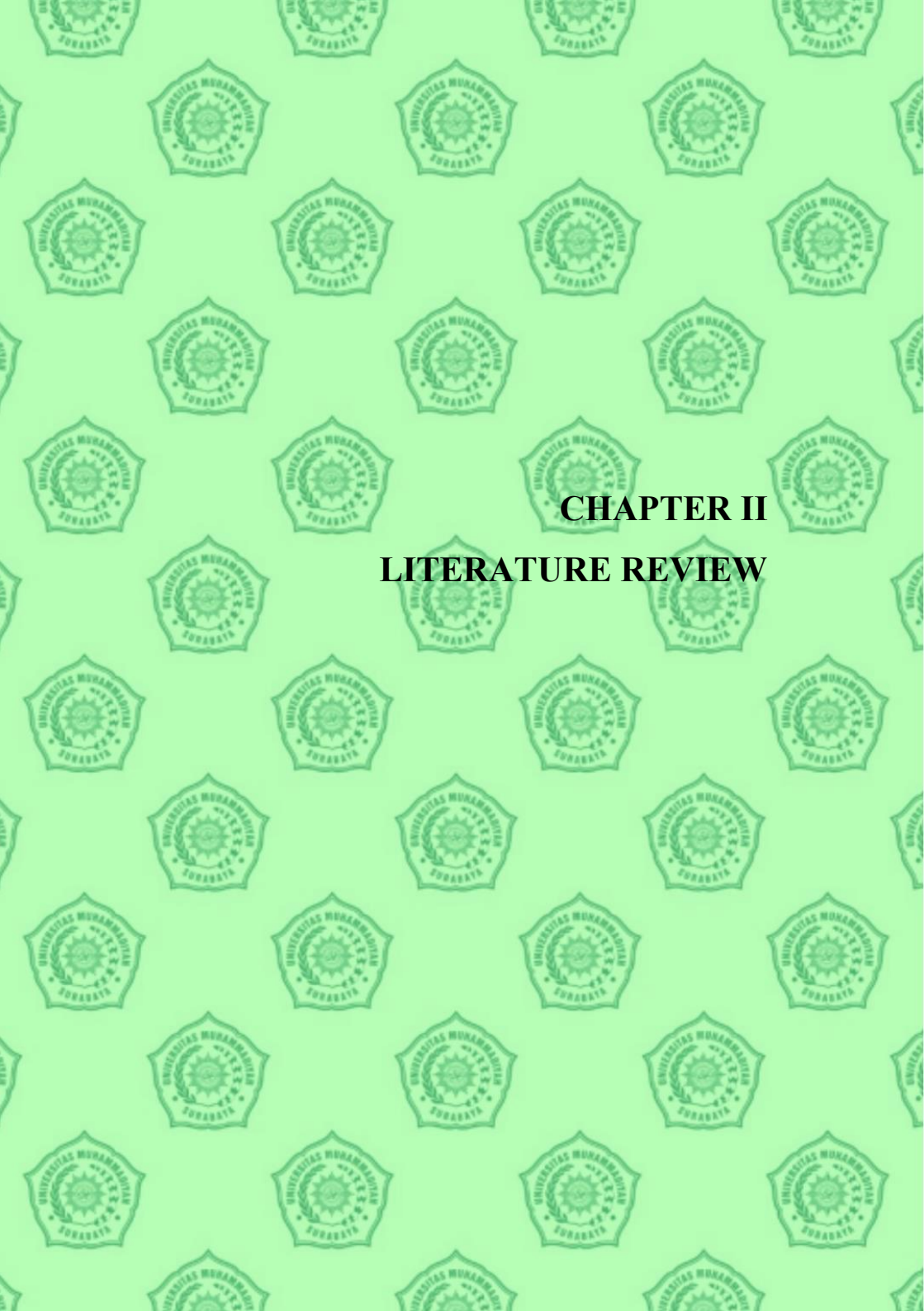




CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter consists of three parts. The first part is a review of the theoretical study, which includes film as literary works, gender stereotypes, intersectional, and black women representation in literary works. The second part is a Review of previous Studies, and the last part is research gap.

2.1 Theoretical Review

2.1.1 Film as Literary Works

In terms of literature, based on Klarer (2004), literature comes from the Latin word "Litteratura" inferred from "littera" which contains a meaning the littlest component of sequential order composing. According to Abrams, the Literature of the Absurd refers to a number of works in drama and prose fiction which share the sense that the human condition is essentially absurd, and that this condition can only be adequately represented through works of literature that are themselves absurd (Abrams, 1999). From the statement above, it can be concluded that literature is a regular form of writing and can even be a form of performance that shows the absurdity of humans in putting a work into a drama or written performance.

Abrams states that since the writings of Plato and Aristotle, the overall literary domain has been enduringly divided into three large classes: lyric, epic or narrative, and drama a distinction that still functions in critical discourse today (Abrams, 1999). In another statement, according to Totawad, the literature was mostly confined to print, which has a form that is more or less permanent (Nagnath Ramrao, 2016). A film's significance can be deciphered through literary analysis, while the entire worth of literature can be discovered through film studies. Nagnath Ramra (2016) clarified that Filmmakers throughout the world can create a lot of remarkable films by utilizing literature, which is an essential resource.

Within the realm of literary studies, film (particularly the movie script) can be examined as a literary text. The script, as the written foundation of a film, contains dialogue, character descriptions, stage directions, and narrative structure that are fundamentally literary elements. In this study, the specific literary subject under investigation is the characterization of Samantha Boone as constructed through the textual elements of the movie script. The analysis focuses on how language, dialogue, narrative framing, and descriptive passages in the script construct gender and racial identity, making the script the primary literary artifact rather than the visual or performative dimensions of the film.

Film studies, as an interdisciplinary field, provides essential tools for analyzing cinematic texts from literary, cultural, and sociological perspectives. According to Jahn (2021), narratological film analysis examines how films construct narratives through elements such as point of view, focalization, and narrative voice like a concept that originate in literary theory and are adapted for the cinematic medium. Film studies thus bridge the gap between traditional literary analysis and the study of visual media, allowing researchers to apply established literary analytical methods such as close reading, thematic analysis, and character analysis, to film scripts and cinematic narratives. For this study, film studies provide the methodological foundation for treating the movie script as a text amenable to literary analysis, while intersectionality theory provides the interpretive lens through which the textual construction of Samantha Boone's character is examined.

2.1.2 Gender Stereotypes in Literary Works

Gender stereotypes, defined as generalized and oversimplified beliefs about the attributes, characteristics, and roles that women and men should possess, have been extensively documented in literary representations. Ladzekpo et al. (2024) provide a comprehensive analysis of gender roles and stereotypes in contemporary literature, demonstrating how literary works continue to perpetuate restrictive gender roles despite increased awareness of gender equality issues. Their analysis of 30 novels and short stories across different genres reveals persistent patterns in how

women are portrayed, with particular emphasis on domestic roles, emotional characteristics, and limited professional agency.

Literature has historically played a significant role in both reflecting and constructing gender stereotypes. As documented by scholars, female characters in literary works have traditionally been confined to archetypal roles that emphasize domesticity, emotional vulnerability, and subordination to male authority. The medieval period, for instance, presented common female archetypes including the Virgin (a pure woman whose primary function is marriage), the mother (devoted to supporting her children and husband), the Witch (a wise or non-conforming woman punished for her otherness), and the Whore (considered deviant and unworthy). These archetypes persisted through various literary periods, evolving but maintaining their fundamental restrictive nature.

The representation of women in literature has profound implications for societal understanding of gender roles. As Ladzekpo et al. (2024) argue, literary representations of gender have long-lasting effects on audience perceptions and expectations, influencing everything from career aspirations to interpersonal relationships. While literature is not the sole source of gender socialization, its narrative power and cultural authority make it a particularly influential force in shaping gender attitudes and expectations across generations.

Contemporary literary analysis increasingly recognizes that gender operates not in isolation but in complex interaction with other identity markers such as race, class, and historical context. This recognition has led to more nuanced analyses of how different groups of women experience distinct forms of literary representation, with women of color facing particular challenges in terms of underrepresentation and stereotypical portrayals in canonical and contemporary literature.

2.1.3 Intersectionality Theory

Intersectionality, as a theoretical framework, originated from the groundbreaking work of legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989), who examined how Black women experience discrimination that cannot be understood through the lens of race or gender alone. Crenshaw's seminal work emerged from her analysis of anti-discrimination law, revealing that traditional feminist and anti-racist frameworks inadequately addressed the unique challenges faced by individuals existing at the intersection of multiple marginalized identities (Crenshaw, 1991). The theory posits that social categorizations such as race, class, gender, and sexuality create overlapping and interdependent systems of discrimination or disadvantage that shape individual and collective experiences in ways that are irreducible to any single axis of identity.

According to Crenshaw (1989), intersectionality refers to the way in which multiple forms of inequality (particularly race and gender) operate together to produce experiences of discrimination that are distinct from those produced by any single form of inequality acting alone. Crenshaw developed this concept through her examination of legal cases involving Black women, demonstrating that anti-discrimination law treated race and gender as mutually exclusive categories, thereby failing to recognize the compound discrimination that Black women faced. She argued that Black women's experiences could not be captured by simply adding together the effects of racism and sexism; rather, the intersection of these identities created a qualitatively different form of marginalization. In her later work, Crenshaw (1991) expanded the framework by introducing the concepts of structural intersectionality (how the intersection of race and gender shapes the structural experiences of women of color, such as in employment, housing, and domestic violence) and political intersectionality (how the intersection of race and gender marginalizes women of color within both feminist and anti-racist political agendas).

The influence of intersectionality extends across multiple disciplines and has fundamentally transformed how scholars understand

identity, power, and inequality. By revealing that systems of oppression including patriarchy, racism, classism, and heteronormativity that are not independent but mutually constitutive, intersectionality challenges single-axis frameworks that examine only one form of inequality at a time (Hill Collins & Bilge, 2021). The theory demonstrates that individuals who occupy multiple marginalized positions face unique forms of discrimination that are invisible when each identity category is analyzed separately. This has profound implications for policy, advocacy, and scholarship, as it demands that analyses of inequality account for the simultaneous operation of multiple systems of power.

In literary studies, intersectionality provides a powerful analytical tool for examining how characters who embody multiple marginalized identities are constructed in texts. When applied to literary analysis, intersectionality directs attention to how textual elements such as dialogue, narrative framing, character descriptions, and plot structure, construct characters at the intersection of multiple identity categories. The analytical approach involves examining not only how individual identity markers (such as race or gender) are represented, but how their interaction produces unique characterization patterns, narrative positions, and power dynamics within the text. For film scripts specifically, intersectional analysis examines how the foundational textual blueprint constructs characters whose experiences reflect the simultaneous operation of multiple systems of oppression, revealing how stereotypes, agency, voice, and narrative authority are distributed along intersecting axes of identity

As Cho et al. (2013) elaborate, intersectionality functions as "a method and disposition, a heuristic and analytic tool" (p. 795) that reveals how systems of power, including patriarchy, racism, and classism can operate simultaneously to shape experiences. Hill Collins & Bilge (2021) further develop this framework, arguing that intersectionality provides a critical lens for understanding how power relations are organized and how they affect individual lives and social organization. The application of intersectionality to literary analysis has become increasingly sophisticated. Warner (2008) provides methodological guidance for intersectional approaches, emphasizing the importance of examining how

multiple identities interact within specific contexts. Recent scholarship has emphasized that intersectionality is not merely about adding identities together but understanding how they interact to create unique experiences of privilege and oppression that cannot be predicted from examining each identity category separately (Nash, 2019). This approach is particularly valuable for analyzing literary characters who embody multiple marginalized identities, as it reveals the complexity of their experiences and challenges single-axis interpretations of oppression.

2.1.4 Black Women's Representation in Literary Works

The representation of Black women in literature and film has been characterized as "controlling images" stereotypical representations that justify the social subordination of marginalized groups. These controlling images historically include the mammy, the matriarch, the welfare mother, and the jezebel, each serving to naturalize Black women's exploitation and exclusion (West, 2008). In film specifically, (Bogle & Donald, 2003) traces the history of Black representation in American cinema, documenting how Black women have been confined to a narrow range of stereotypical roles (from the loyal, asexual mammy to the sexually aggressive jezebel) that served to reinforce racial and gender hierarchies. These cinematic stereotypes functioned as intersectional controlling images, simultaneously encoding assumptions about race and gender that positioned Black women as subordinate, one-dimensional, and devoid of intellectual agency.

The tradition of African American literature has long grappled with representations of Black womanhood. As documented in historical analyses, early representations of Black women in American literature often reinforced negative stereotypes, particularly when written by white authors. The development of Black women's literary voices in the 19th and 20th centuries represented a crucial intervention in challenging these controlling images. Writers such as Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, Zora Neale Hurston, and later Toni Morrison and Alice Walker created counter-narratives that centered Black women's experiences, agency, and complexity.

Wajiran & Apriyani (2025) examine how Toni Morrison's novels interrogate the intersections of race, gender, and identity in African American experience. Morrison's work is particularly significant for its exploration of how systemic racism and sexism shape Black women's identities and social roles. Her narratives center on marginalized characters grappling with the legacy of slavery, the impact of racial discrimination, and the pursuit of identity in environments that seek to dehumanize and silence them. Through rich and multi-layered storytelling, Morrison challenges the traditional literary canon by giving voice to those who have been historically excluded, offering a Black feminist perspective that emphasizes resilience, trauma, and resistance.

The representation of Black women in literature has evolved significantly, reflecting changing societal attitudes and the emergence of Black feminist literary criticism. However, as contemporary analyses reveal, Black women continue to face challenges in achieving authentic and multidimensional representation. Literary works often confine Black female characters to supporting roles, limited narrative agency, and stereotypical characterizations that fail to capture the complexity of Black women lived experiences. An intersectional lens reveals that these representational limitations are not simply the result of gender bias or racial bias alone, but emerge from the intersection of both, producing a unique form of marginalization in which Black women's stories, voices, and complexities are doubly obscured (Crenshaw, 1989).

2.1.5 Gender in Society

Gender, as a social construct, refers to the roles, behaviors, activities, and expectations that a given society considers appropriate for men and women. Unlike biological sex, gender is culturally produced and historically variable, shaped by social institutions, cultural norms, and power relations (Ellemers, 2018). Gender stereotypes is a generalized beliefs about the characteristics and roles of women and men that has a function as powerful social mechanisms that prescribe and constrain individual behavior, opportunities, and self-perception.

In society, gender operates as a fundamental organizing principle that intersects with other social categories such as race, class, and sexuality to produce differentiated experiences of privilege and marginalization. Ward & Grower (2020) demonstrate that media representations play a central role in the development and reinforcement of gender role stereotypes, as audiences internalize the gendered messages embedded in the cultural texts they consume. These representations shape expectations about how women and men should behave, what roles they should occupy, and what aspirations are considered appropriate for each gender.

For women of color, gender stereotypes operate in conjunction with racial stereotypes to produce uniquely constraining expectations. Black women, for instance, have historically been subjected to stereotypes that simultaneously encode racial and gender assumptions such as the expectation of superhuman strength and resilience (the "strong Black woman" trope) or the denial of intellectual capability and emotional complexity (Davis, 2015). These intersecting stereotypes shape not only how Black women are perceived in society but also how they are represented in cultural texts, including literature and film. Understanding how gender functions in society (particularly at its intersection with race) is therefore essential for analyzing how characters like Samantha Booke are constructed in dramatic texts and what these constructions reveal about broader social attitudes toward women of color in intellectual and public spaces.

2.1.6 The Great Debaters and Samantha Booke

The Great Debaters (2007) is an American historical drama film directed by and starring Denzel Washington. The film is based on the true story of Professor Melvin B. Tolson, a debate coach at Wiley College, a historically Black college in Marshall, Texas. Set in 1935, the film follows the Wiley College debate team as they overcome racial discrimination under Jim Crow laws to achieve an unprecedented winning streak against other colleges, ultimately competing against Harvard University. The film received widespread critical acclaim for its powerful

portrayal of Black intellectual excellence and resistance to racial oppression, earning NAACP Image Awards for Outstanding Motion Picture. Beyond its narrative of racial struggle, the film also raises issues of gender, as the debate team includes the only female debater in the school's history, positioning it as a rich site for intersectional analysis.

Samantha Boone, portrayed by Jurnee Smollett, is the sole female member of the Wiley College debate team and one of the central characters of the film. Her character is loosely based on Henrietta Bell Wells, the only female member of the real Wiley College debate team in 1930, who participated in the first collegiate interracial debate in the United States. In the film, Samantha aspires to become a lawyer, a profession almost entirely inaccessible to Black women in 1930s America. Her presence on the team places her at the intersection of two forms of marginalization: as a Black person in a racially segregated society, and as a woman in a male-dominated intellectual space. This dual positioning makes her characterization a particularly productive subject for intersectional analysis, as her experiences of constraint and resistance cannot be fully understood through the lens of race or gender alone (Crenshaw, 1989).

2.2 Previous Studies

2.2.1 Gender Representation.

Research on gender representation in historical films has revealed persistent patterns of stereotyping and limited role diversity for female characters, particularly women of color. Silverstein (2003) explores the evolution of the female gaze in visual representation, examining how women's perspectives have been both constrained and expressed through photographic and cinematic media. This work demonstrates how historical dramas often struggle to balance authentic female perspectives with period-appropriate portrayals, sometimes resulting in anachronistic representations that prioritize contemporary sensibilities over historical accuracy. The tension between representing women's genuine experiences and conforming to audience expectations

creates both opportunities for counter-stereotypical characterizations and risks of presenting sanitized versions of historical oppression that fail to adequately capture the complex realities faced by marginalized women.

Visualization of partition through a feminist lens reveals how gender narratives in historical media journalism have often been overshadowed by broader political and social accounts (Sarkar, 2023). The study emphasizes the importance of feminist analysis in uncovering hidden stories and challenging dominant narratives in historical representation. This research demonstrates that historical films frequently center male experiences and perspectives, relegating female characters, particularly women of color to peripheral roles that fail to capture their historical agency and significance.

Research on women's representation across multiple media formats reveals that despite some progress, women continue to face systematic underrepresentation and stereotyping in the literature (Kaur & Kanwal, 2025). Their analysis of women's issues in literature demonstrates that even in contemporary productions, women are frequently portrayed through limited and stereotypical frameworks that emphasize traditional gender roles, physical appearance, and emotional characteristics while minimizing professional achievement, intellectual capability, and leadership qualities.

While existing research on gender representation in historical films has revealed persistent patterns of stereotyping and limited role diversity for female characters. These studies primarily focus on visual representation and the development of gendered perspectives in media rather than the foundational textual construction at the script level. Additionally, previous gender representation studies tend to analyze contemporary films or survey multiple films broadly, rather than conducting in-depth intersectional analysis of a single character in a historical debate context. This study differs by focusing specifically on script-level textual analysis of Samantha Booke's characterization, examining how gender stereotypes are embedded in dialogue, stage directions, and narrative framing before reaching the screen. Furthermore,

while previous studies acknowledge intersectionality conceptually, few apply systematic intersectional methodology to analyze how race and gender simultaneously shape character construction in historical drama scripts, particularly for Black women in intellectual and competitive spaces.

2.2.2 Studies on The Great Debaters and Similar Films

Scholarly analysis of *The Great Debaters* (2007) has primarily focused on racial themes while largely neglecting systematic gender analysis. Rifqi et al. (2025) examines racial discrimination in the film through critical discourse analysis, identifying 26 racist utterances that function as discursive acts reflecting and reproducing unequal power relations. The study explores how the film depicts linguistic mechanisms that reinforce racial hierarchies (including slurs, threats, institutionalized policies, and internalized oppression) while also showing moments of rhetorical resistance where the Wiley College debate team asserts Black identity and intellectual agency. However, Rifqi's analysis focuses predominantly on racial discrimination and linguistic oppression, mentioning female characters only peripherally without analyzing how gender stereotypes shape their characterization or how their presence challenges or reinforces gendered expectations within the competitive debate context.

Parry-Giles & Blair (2002) trace how cultural expectations about appropriate feminine behavior and gendered rhetorical constraints have historically shaped women's participation in public discourse, examining how first ladies navigated the tension between private domestic roles and public political visibility from 1789 to 2002. Their work demonstrates how gender ideology constrains women's rhetorical authority and public voice, a dynamic particularly relevant to understanding female participation in historically male-dominated spaces like formal debate. This scholarly gap represents a significant oversight, particularly given the historical exclusion of women from formal debate spaces and the gendered nature of rhetorical expectations regarding appropriate speech, demeanor, and intellectual expression.

Existing scholarship on The Great Debaters has predominantly centered on racial themes, Black excellence, and linguistic mechanisms of racial oppression while female characters receive only small attention without systematic gender analysis. Rifqi's examination of racist utterances and discourse provides valuable insights into racial discrimination but focuses almost exclusively on racial dynamics, leaving Samantha Boone's unique position as the only female debater largely unexamined. This study fills this critical gap by making Samantha Boone the central subject of analysis rather than a small figure, applying intersectionality theory systematically to examine how her characterization reflects and challenges gender stereotypes at the intersection of race and gender. Unlike previous studies that mention female characters in passing, this research conducts comprehensive textual analysis of Samantha's dialogue, interactions, narrative positioning, and character development throughout the entire script.

2.2.3 Studies on Female Characters in Intellectual Contexts

Limited research exists on the portrayal of female characters in intellectual or academic contexts within cinema. Davis (2015) develops the concept of the "strong Black woman collective," examining communication practices and representations of Black women who demonstrate resilience, capability, and strength. However, Davis notes that the "strong Black woman" trope itself can become limiting, creating expectations that Black women must constantly demonstrate exceptional strength without vulnerability, a representation that fails to capture the full complexity of Black women's experiences and may contribute to harmful stereotypes about Black women's superhuman resilience.

Parry-Giles & Blair (2002) examine how gender ideology has constrained women's participation in public discourse throughout American history, tracing how first ladies navigated between private domestic expectations and public political roles. Their analysis reveals how cultural expectations about appropriate feminine behavior (including constraints on women's voices, rhetorical styles, and public authority) have been used to police women's speech and limit their contributions to

public debate. This dynamic, which positioned women in a contested space between traditional domesticity and public influence, continues to influence contemporary representations of women in rhetorical and intellectual contexts, though Parry-Giles and Blair focus specifically on political figures rather than women in academic or competitive intellectual spaces like debate.

Davis's concept of the "strong Black woman collective" examines resilience and strength but does not specifically address female intellectualism in competitive debate contexts or analyze how this trope operates in dramatic scripts from a literary analysis perspective. Furthermore, while Parry-Giles & Blair (2002) trace how gender ideology and expectations about feminine behavior have constrained women's participation in public discourse historically, focusing on first ladies' navigation of political visibility and rhetorical authority, this work does not apply these insights to specific literary character analysis or examine how contemporary dramatic texts represent Black women in intellectual competition. This study differs by conducting detailed script-level analysis of a Black female character specifically positioned in an intellectual, competitive, and historically male-dominated space (formal debate), examining both how gender stereotypes constrain her characterization and how the script potentially challenges these limitations. Additionally, this research applies intersectional literary analysis methodology to a debate film script, a combination that has received minimal scholarly attention despite the rich potential for examining how race, gender, and intellectual authority intersect in dramatic representation.

2.3 Research Gap

Three critical research gaps emerge from this existing study. First, there is a notable absence of gender focused intersectional analysis of *The Great Debaters*, with most studies prioritizing racial themes while treating gender as secondary or incidental. Second, limited research exists on the script level construction of Black female characters in intellectual contexts, particularly examining how dialogue, stage directions, and

narrative framing either reinforce or challenge gender stereotypes. Third, insufficient attention has been paid to how female debaters are portrayed in cinema, especially the tension between traditional gender expectations of the era depicted and the counter stereotypical demands of competitive intellectual performance.

These gaps represent a significant oversight in film and gender studies, particularly given the ongoing relevance of intersectional discrimination in contemporary society and the enduring impact of media representations on public consciousness. To date, no published study has conducted a systematic, script-level intersectional analysis of gender and race in the characterization of Samantha Boone in *The Great Debaters*. This study addresses that gap by examining how the script's dialogue, stage directions, and narrative framing construct Samantha's identity at the intersection of gender and race, thereby contributing a method and a case study that existing scholarship on the film has not yet provided.

