

THE PORTRAYAL OF RACIAL DISCRIMINATION TOWARDS THE CHARACTERS IN MY NAME IS LEON NOVEL BY KIT DE WAAL

Selvira Setia Avisia, Muhammad Natsir, Fatimah M.

English Department, Faculty of Cultural Studies
Mulawarman University
Email: selvirasa60@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

The study aims to discover the types of racial discrimination portrayed in Kit De Waal's *My Name is Leon* novel as well as to identify the discrimination seen through the colored characters in the novel. The researcher uses the qualitative research with a mimetic approach to conduct the research. The data source of the study is Kit De Waal's *My Name is Leon* novel. The data are collected from the narration and dialogues related to the racial discrimination toward the characters through the characterization depicted by the characters. The theories that are used in this study are Blank's theory of Measuring Racial Discrimination and Kenan's theory of narration. The results of this study show that explicit and intentional discrimination (verbal antagonism, avoidance, segregation, and physical attack), subtle prejudice, and organizational process are portrayed in this novel seen through the characters' direct and indirect presentation which involve their characterization such as their speeches, actions, external appearances, and the environments related to the racial discrimination issue depicted in the story.

Keywords: *My Name is Leon*, Discrimination, Racism, Indirect Presentation

ABSTRAK

Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menemukan jenis-jenis diskriminasi rasial yang digambarkan dalam novel Kit De Waal berjudul *My Name is Leon* serta untuk mengidentifikasi diskriminasi yang dilihat melalui tokoh-tokoh di dalam novel. Penelitian ini merupakan penelitian kualitatif yang menggunakan pendekatan mimesis. Sumber data dari penelitian ini adalah novel karya Kit De Waal berjudul *My Name is Leon*. Data tersebut dikumpulkan dari narasi dan dialog yang terkait dengan diskriminasi rasial terhadap tokoh-tokoh melalui karakterisasi yang digambarkan oleh para tokoh. Teori-teori yang digunakan untuk penelitian ini adalah Teori Pengukuran Diskriminasi Rasial dari Blank dan teori Kenan mengenai teori narasi. Hasil penelitian ini menunjukkan bahwa diskriminasi eksplisit dan disengaja (antagonisme verbal, penghindaran, segregasi, dan serangan fisik), prasangka licik dan proses organisasi digambarkan dalam novel ini dilihat melalui presentasi tidak langsung dari karakter berkulit hitam yang melibatkan karakterisasi mereka seperti wicara, tingkah laku, penampilan luar, dan lingkungan yang terkait dengan isu diskriminasi rasial yang tergambarkan dalam cerita tersebut.

Kata Kunci: *My Name is Leon*, Diskriminasi, Rasisme, Presentasi Tidak Langsung

A. INTRODUCTION

Racism had always been a debated discussion since the 19th century until today. As the evidence of the present issue, reported by “Equality and Human Rights Commission” (2017), a couple of Indian-Pakistani-British-born parents in the UK are not allowed to adopt a white child from an adoption agency not because of their capability to provide, but because of the preference of adopting white children is only for the white couples. They were suggested to adopt their foster child from India, which provided the similarity of cultural values between the parents and the children (Equality & Human Rights Commission, 2017).

Although it was ought to be acknowledged that the root of this social issue all started in Europe as the British empire widened their colonial territories by invading Caribbean and Africa for the resources and the people for slavery, they began practicing slavery until the end of the 18th century. However, even though in the 18th century slavery was abolished, there were some British-colonized regions that were still practicing slave trades and slavery at that time (e.g. Australia, New Zealand, and Canada), (Lang 389). Furthermore, the colonized countries’ natives experienced great mass of racism which caused them to be unable to participate in governmental issues nor able to govern themselves. Moreover, racism towards the colored people also occurred in the development of Great Britain in the early 20th century, as the colored people were invited to Britain, following the advertisements of job openings that the whites were unable to do. However, the British people believed that the immigrants would take over their occupations so the immigrants had to start working in small shops and had to live in a segregated housing area than the common Brits. The kinds of racial discriminations the oppressed group encountered, then occurred racial conflicts and riots in England and institutional racial discrimination between the colored people and the British (Lang 362). Since this topic was still moderately the most debated and defended topic worldwide by society,

The portrayals of the issues were depicted in her debut novel *My Name is Leon* which represented the situation of race riots that happened in England in the 1980s whereas race riots and police brutality towards the colored people were peaked, followed by the death of a colored man after a riot concerning the racial discrimination towards the colored people or the ethnics outside of the British that made the issue highlighted.

also portrayed some of the shreds of evidence regarding racial discrimination such as the profiling of colored people, the unfair treatment experienced by the main character mainly since his maternal brother does not look similar by his skin color, and the physical attack that was being experienced by the colored people in the novel.

B. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Based on the background and the research questions mentioned above, the theories used in this study include: explicit, intentional discrimination, subtle,

unconscious, automatic prejudice, statistical profiling, organizational processes and characterization.

1. Explicit, Intentional Discrimination

These acts of discrimination involve publicly and/or overtly negative behavior to an individual from the minor race groups that are being executed by will and may result in biases towards the members of minor race groups (Blank 56). These types of discrimination are verbal antagonism, avoidance, segregation, physical attack, and extermination,

a. Verbal (and Nonverbal) Antagonism

This act includes the act of calling an individual from a different, inferior race by racial slurs and giving them undervalue comments about their race in general. This act is considered to be an easy case but it may create a hostile environment for the victimized race (Essed & Figgin in Blank 56). This act may also appear as nonverbal antagonism where people would treat the colored people differently by behaviour that will lead to the denial of employment or limited access to resources.

b. Avoidance

The avoidance is addressed only to the oppressed people to keep the “purity” out of the dominating community while also disintegrating the oppressed community such as most of the white children who are not taught well of the effects of racism toward colored people, will choose to make friends with the same white children in their community and will be uncomfortable if there are any colored people in their circle. (Blank 56)

c. Segregation

Segregation is portrayed on how black people are only allowed to visit designated schools, libraries, or public facilities, and for the public transportation and some sorts, they are only allowed to sit in the back of the bus or train in the assigned area separated from the major color (Blank 57)

d. Physical Attack

Physical attacks often occur when the dominating race feels a certain pride and hate towards the oppressed groups. It may occur spontaneously or concoctive to address the hatred of the dominant people by physically injuring them just because the victims are the minor group member. (Blank 58)

e. Extermination

A mass killing is conducted in order to slaughter the minority of races or ethnicity and “clear the path” for the superior. The extermination of inferior group members involves the dominant racial group that has targeted the minor-race group and the descendants. For the victims, they are expected to be compliant and not to protect themselves for they are in the way of the supremacists. It also involves ethnic cleansing and genocide of the oppressed groups or minorities. (Blank 58)

2. Subtle, Unconscious, Automatic Prejudice

The subtle and indirect prejudice often involves the in-groups to unconsciously categorize the outgroup members based on their race, gender, and age and develop anxiety or fear towards the outgroup members, negative stereotyping, and discriminatory impulses that may create an instinct to avoid the colored people. (Blank 59)

3. Statistical Profiling

This type of discrimination often appears when an individual is applying for a job in a major company, or in the airport check where only certain people will be suspected based on their external appearance. Through the mentioned case above, the outgroup members will develop some behaviors to indicate that they are slightly above the group average by dressing up in the way of how the society accepted, or to get an expensive education in order to get out of the discrimination. Thus, the profiling of the disadvantaged group may cause short-term outcomes and long-term behavior (Blank 63).

4. Organizational Processes

This act of racism is reflecting on the individual's act of racism which is implied in the organizational terms as well that involves lots and housing for the in-group and outgroups.

According to Blank et al., if the organization involved racism practices in their policies, the organizations tend to arrange the interests based on the skin color of the clients. Although the following organizations will have policies of declining the requests of the colored clients because the financial capabilities are lower than the equivalent major race regularly. The practices of the following acts are sometimes considered natural, but if the major race is the one recommending it towards the same-group members, the chances for the disadvantaged group will be systematically low or even excluded during the service (Blank 63-65).

5. Characterization

In accordance with Kenan's definition of characterization, it is a way of narrating a story through the character-traits that are served in the literary works, although these traits may or may not be too apparent within the text there are the indicators that are adjusting to the factors of characterization which are presented through direct definition and indirect presentation which consists of action, speech, external appearance, and environment (Kenan, 61).

a. Action

A character's trait can be visualized through the action such as one-time actions and habitual actions. One-time acts are the kind of activity that stimulates the dynamic part of the story, which also changes the narration into a turn-point. Meanwhile, for the habitual acts are the actions that are showing the static traits of a character and it tends to stick to the character in

the whole story. Both acts, can be available throughout the story, with each of these categories such as acts of commission (the regulars or basic acts brought by characters), acts of omission (the presence of compulsion, but absent on the intention to do so), and contemplated acts (the spontaneous, unrealized intentions or acts). The actions of the characters may change based on the authors' will in the story and it helps to define the characters' specific traits. (Kenan 63)

b. Speech

The characters' speech, both the spoken and the mind, can be a distinctive indicator of the traits between characters whether from its forms or contexts. The speech also may describe not only the speaker but also the one the speaker is speaking of/about, and it also gives a style or a description about the characters through how the individuals try to convey something or by the language that is being used. The speech may also draw distinctive traits such as social classes, profession, or origin of the characters through particular phrases (Kenan 65).

c. External Appearance

This trait of characters helps on emphasizing the image of the characters. It also displays the connections between physical appearance and personality traits. The external appearance also helps to disguisedly define which traits are attached to the characters within the story, and it is described by narrating the mimics or gestures applied by the characters within the story. The development of external appearance is more visible through the detailed description in order to help the readers know the characters and even grasping them (Kenan 67).

d. Environment

The environment surrounding the characters is essential in describing the characters. (e.g. residential, school, shops, etc.) or the human environment such as families, friends, or even pets to determine the traits of the character. The correlation between environment and external appearances is significant since each boosts one of the other. The situation surrounding the environment may also reflect the condition of the characters itself that may result in showing the traits of the characters (Kenan 68).

C. RESEARCH METHOD

This research is a qualitative research using a mimetic approach which focused on the essence of the data rather than the amount of the collected data. This method is used to chronologically trace back events that happened to see the effects in the future or present. It also helps researchers go beyond the common concepts and to revise or create a new conceptual framework (Miles & Huberman 4) or as stated by Creswell, qualitative research also helps the researchers finding certain issues as their topics in several ways through library research (Creswell 240). Meanwhile, the mimetic approach is used as it defines to the similarities or imitations between real life and literary work (Abram 7). These methods being

used are suitable since *My Name is Leon* novel represents of the unfair treatment of the colored people through the dialogues, and the narrations in the novel.

The researcher gathered the data by observation through reading the novel as the subject to collect the materials. Observation is the term of a process that enables the researcher to learn certain activities of the subjects or participants in order to gain some materials for the analysis. (Baker 3) The observation of this story is done through close reading, then selecting the data that has the criteria based on Blank's theory of kinds of racial discrimination. The research question for this study is how racial discrimination occurred in the story and it is answered by using Blank's theory as guidance to specify which types are included in the story.

D. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

1. Racial Discrimination Occurred Towards the Characters as Seen in Colored Characters

Based on the research, there are types of racial discrimination occurred in the novel according to Blank's theory such as explicit, intentional discrimination, subtle, unconscious, automatic prejudice, statistical profiling, and organizational processes which are discussed below.

a. Verbal (and Nonverbal) Discrimination

The first racial discrimination that was shown in the novel is explicit and intentional discrimination. It was depicted through several colored characters and one of them was Leon as the main character. He was a mixed-race boy and he suffered several mistreatments from other people who consider him as a weird person because of his skin color. As his journey began after he was placed in a foster home, along the way he met some people who were also has the same appearance regarding on the skin color. While he got along with them, he encountered this event when one of them, Castro was protesting about how white people kept disregarding them similar to animals:

“That’s the old way, Johnson, when black people had to be grateful. Like when you and my father come to this country in your good suit and your pressed hair, doing as you’re told, cleaning floors and driving buses.”

Castro pauses and looks at each man in turn.

“Them days is gone. We don’t have to be holding out our hat for the white man’s leavings. If we come together to form something, it’s an army. Not a— what you call— lobby group. You think white people going to listen to monkeys? **Monkeys** is what they call we.” (Waal 94)

According to Castro’s opinion, it was better to start a rally to properly express the concerns of colored people. Meanwhile the depiction of the racial discrimination was seen through the whole spoken sentence of the mentioned character which quoted on the mockery that he acknowledged from white people. The white people were underestimating the colored people since they are lower than their race which made their opinions irrelevant to be heard and the white

people also level the colored people as same as the animals, in this case the colored people were compared with monkeys which made them easier to be avoided and ignored during arguments without hearing what they say since it only wasted their time. This term monkey was considered as an example of verbal antagonism which occurred as one decided to call the oppressed group by their slurs or degrading them less than a human being. It was also being represented through Castro's argument.

b. Avoidance

One of avoidance evidences that was found in the novel occurred as Leon learned from Maureen, his foster parent that his brother was about to be separated from him because the significant difference of him and his brother through skin color. Their birth mother happened to have extramarital affair with a married white man which resulted on her having a white children as Leon's brother and gained her mental illness after the event, meanwhile Leon was born light skin since his mother previously married a colored man but was annulled since he was taken into custody:

"You're a good boy, Leon. I know this is hard and you're a good brother to Jake but we have to think of his future."

"Yes"

Later, when Jake's in bed and Leon's watching TV, Maureen asks him about what Salma said.

"She means it, you know, love. Did you understand that, Leon? Jake is going to be adopted."

"What's adopted?"

"Jake is going to have a new mom and dad"

"Why?"

"Because, love. Just because. **Because he's a baby, a white baby. And you're not. Apparently.** Because people are horrible and because life isn't fair, pigeon. Not fair at all. And if you ask me, it's plain wrong." says Maureen. (Waal 40)

In this case, Leon was being separated because of white parents' preference on adopting children only laid on the white children and presumably because Jake was also a baby too. Stated by Maureen, it is considered as a wrongdoing since not only Leon was going to lose his only sibling, there were also no parents that had interest on adopting him. It is also shown how white children had more privileges than other children from other races even if they shared a womb. The white children were considered having higher hierarchy than the colored children due to the facility they had.

c. Segregation

One of segregation depiction in this novel was shown as Leon decided to explore further out of Sylvia, his new foster parent with his new bike and as he gained interest on a colored cyclist to an environment where he found his new acquaintances and decided to follow him:

“... There are loads more of black people than where Sylvia lives & lots of shops sell funny-looking vegetables.... Down a narrow lane behind rusty iron railings, there is a huge, flat, garden with lots of huts. He goes up to the sign “Rookery Road Allotments” (Waal 76)

From the evidence above, it showed that the colored people were located in a significant location. They built their own community in that certain spot where it was rare to occur white residents. It was considered as segregation since the immigrants or non-whites were placed in a designated area further from the white neighborhoods and the people who lived in the allotment built their own local shop where they could sell their own diverse groceries which they harvested from their own plantation. The visible aspect of characterization was the environment aspect which described how the surrounding of the allotment as Leon followed the cyclist who happened to live inside the allotment. Leon also felt like he belonged in the allotment since he discovered that there were plenty of people who had the same figure as him that lived there.

d. Physical Attack

This type of discrimination was also discovered as the story escalated to a point which Leon happened to witness a police brutality towards his new acquaintance, Castro as he was being apprehended by the police in Tufty’s place. The intention of the officers was to question the whereabouts of his colleague, Rainbow who had gone missing after a riot but as Castro failed to answer, they began to seize him.

Three of the policemen grab Castro; he starts to buck and struggle but he can’t get free... It takes four police officers to drag Castro out of the allotments, he’s shouting and fighting and twisting his body. **One of the policemen has his arms locked around Castro’s neck and Castro’s trying to pull it off. Spit comes out of Castro’s mouth like he’s a wild dog. One of his shoes comes off. His jeans are pulled down to his ankle** and DC Green is smiling all the time and tightening his belt on his trousers. (Waal 128)

According to the evidence above, the officers decided to use excessive force to apprehend Castro and did not loosen their grips despite of how apparent his pain was. It was a physical abuse towards a colored person and it was also being acknowledged by the detective constable who was present at the time of apprehension. It seemed that brutal arrest of colored people was allowed and commonly happened as long as the detective charge was present. It was also

depicted through the sentences describing the acts of commission that was being experienced by Castro vividly being harmed by the officers. This act was also done intentionally and as a basic act brought by the officers while apprehending Castro. It was considered as habitual since the violence acts done by the officers also happened to the other colored characters either mentioned or visibly occurred.

e. **Subtle, Unconscious, Automatic Prejudice**

An evidence of this type of racial discrimination was also found in this certain scene when Leon was buying sweets in a store and as soon as he walked to the cashier, the owner decided to state a prejudicial comment regarding his appearance.

“Did you see my windows?” asks the man.

“No” says Leon. Then he notices that there is a big piece of cardboard in the bottom half of the glass door.

“You didn’t see what happened? **People running around smashing up shops and throwing stones. Why are you doing this?**”

“I didn’t,” says Leon and he pushes his bike out of the shop. Leon only throws stones over by the fence at the allotment when he’s helping Tufty dig his garden, so the Pakistani man is wrong. (Waal 105)

The evidence above showed that Leon was being prejudiced due to his skin color. The owner, a Pakistani man immediately suspected him to be one of the vandals who damaged his shop because of the riot caused by the colored people which involved them vandalizing his shop in the aftermath. Because of that, Leon was prejudiced as one of the participants or related to demonstrators meanwhile Leon defended himself by saying he did not do it and only thought that he only threw stones over the fence in his allotment since he was only an innocent child and he had no idea what the Pakistani man was talking about. The depiction of the prejudice was shown by the man’s spoken sentence emphasizing on the accusation of colored people’s vandalism toward Leon while Leon was innocently denying it because he did not think he did it.

f. **Statistical Profiling**

Statistical profiling data were also found in this novel and one of them happened when Leon experienced his sadness after his brother got adopted and he decided to stare into the mirror after he cried quietly in the bathroom. As he was staring into the mirror, the author explained on how he did not get adopted with Jake’s family.

Leon catches himself in the mirror. He thought he would see the Incredible Hulk with green skin and a chest as wide as a double bed and a ripped shirt. But he looks just the same. He is nearly ten and **he is black and Jake is one**

and he is white. That's why Jake is adopted. That's what Maureen said and she's the only person who has never lied, (Waal 138)

The data above portrayed on how Jake's appearance mattered more than his and it showed that only the favored skin would have the easier life. This profiling caused Leon having to accept that he was unfavorable by his skin color by Jake's family or others since he did not meet the preference of white parents or the agency's qualification. Both parties did not even considerate Leon because he is a child like any other children from other races and it was an assumption that colored children were less attractive. This data was explained directly by the author through her narration which described the physical appearance of Leon.

g. Organizational Processes

Organizational process occurred when an institutional agency tends to prioritize the dominant race while delaying or rejecting their attendance for the colored people. This unfair process was depicted in this novel and it was shown as Leon eavesdropped on Maureen and Silvia's conversation about the brothers' adoption and the uncertainty of his adoption.

"That one will get adopted, won't he, what's his name again?" asks Sylvia.
"**Leon. Not a chance. That's what they say.**" says Maureen"
"Well, all right. It's a shame for him, but you're still running yourself ragged, that's all I know." (Waal 58)

The evidence above showed that Leon had less privilege of being adopted because of the lack of interest in adopting colored children by white parents. The prioritized children to be adopted were always the white children among other colors however the colored children or the other ethnics would not be able to get adopted or the chance of their adoption would be rare. The social worker of the unnamed adoption agency through Maureen's explanation was plainly informing of Leon's reluctance of adoption since there were no parents that had interest in him. The depiction of an unfair organizational process was emphasized by the dialogue above which Maureen stated that represents the inequality between the social class or the privileges between the brothers to be adopted. The social workers always prioritized the adoption of the white children or babies instead of giving equal rights for other immigrated or colored children. They even did not give the other non-white children any chances for their adoption to show that they were less loved which was undignified for a social institution.

2. Discussion

The novel had four types of racial discrimination as firstly, explicit and intentional discrimination indicated by verbal antagonism which explained the hatred toward colored people was represented explicitly through the mockery, or the non-verbal intimidation through how other characters saw the colored

characters. Then avoidance which depicted the unfair treatment did by the superior group toward colored people to purposely avoid the colored person to show that they had no intention toward colored people. Afterward, segregation involved how the superior group had different privileges on facilities or opportunities and the colored people would be less prioritized. Physical attack described the hateful toward the colored people being explicitly expressed through harmful act that resulted on injuries or up to the point of murder. Secondly, the discrimination acts involved subtle prejudice which the outgroup unconsciously categorizing the colored people based on their physical appearances such as skin color or the historical aspect such as their cultural aspect. Thirdly, the statistical profiling described on how the colored people have to follow a certain lifestyle of the white people in order to fit in while having to degrade themselves in order to gain recognition. And lastly, the organizational process in which the superior-dominated institution would always prioritize the business of their own race members while delaying or rejecting the business of colored people by giving them reasons such as colored people were incapable financially or the other party had no interest in the applicant.

This research also discussed the portrayal of the discrimination seen by the characters in the novel. By using Kenan's characterization theory, it was divided into two types such as direct definition which the author explicitly described the characters and indirect description which included the style of narration that tends to involve the surrounding or behavior that depicts the character. The dominant type of narration shown in this research is indirect presentation. This includes four indicators of indirect presentation which were action, speech, external appearances, and environments. In the story, the most dominant type of narration was through the speech of the characters. The speech depicts discrimination through the stories of the characters, how the characters portrayed the situation or delivered their experiences of discrimination.

E. CONCLUSION

As the result of the research about the portrayal of racial discrimination towards the characters in *My Name is Leon* novel, the researcher had come to the conclusion that this novel portrayed the four types of discrimination in this novel which had been analyzed using Blank's theory. They consisted of explicit and intentional discrimination with the indicators of verbal antagonism, avoidance, segregation, physical attack, subtle prejudice, and organizational process. The discrimination happened as the story escalated into the main problems starting with Leon and Jake's separation and it was portrayed by Leon's point of view as the main character in this novel and these discriminations were experienced by other colored characters as well through their actions, speeches, appearances and environmental aspects or by how the author described them in the novel.

However, the types of discrimination that appeared the most in this novel were explicit, intentional discrimination and organizational process. The explicit, intentional discrimination data includes verbal antagonism which was experienced by all of the colored characters and physical attacks which were experienced by the

adult characters. However, the organization process discrimination was experienced by the main character only. Meanwhile, the most apparent narration aspect that the researcher had found was the indirect presentation through speech. Most of the colored characters narrated or pointed out the discrimination through their conversation and/or monologue which either they experienced or heard from other characters outside of their race or it was clear to see that this novel is concerned more with the racial discrimination than other sociological aspects.

REFERENCES

- Abrams, M. H. *A Glossary of Literary Terms: Seventh Edition*. Australia: Heinle and Heinle Publishing, 2004
- Blank, Rebecca M., Marilyn Dabady, and Constance F. Citro, National Research Council. *Measuring Racial Discrimination*. Washington DC: The National Academies Press. 2004.
- Creswell, John W., and J. David. Creswell. "Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches." Los Angeles: Sage, 2018
- Miles, Matthew B., A. Michael Huberman, and Johnny Saldana. "Qualitative Data Analysis: A Methods Sourcebook". London: Sage Publishing, 2014
- Rimmon-Kenan, Shlomith. "Narrative fiction: Contemporary poetics". London: Routledge Publishing 2003.
- Waal, Kit De. "My Name Is Leon: a Novel", London: Simon and Schuster, 2016.