

RACIAL DISCRIMINATION TOWARDS AFRICAN AMERICAN IN DEE REES'S *MUDBOUND*

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ABSTRACT

We have often heard about racial discrimination because this relates to the relationship between humans with one another. In this final project, the writer is interested in analyzing of racial discrimination that occurs in African-Americans in a film titled *Mudbound* by Dee Rees as research material. For collecting data, the writer uses the library method and the approach used by the writer in this final project is a structural approach. Based on the writer's analysis, the writer found some discrimination experienced by African-Americans. Most of the discrimination they experience is stemmed from Jim Crow Law at the time.

Keywords: *Racial Discrimination, Jim Crow Law, African-American, Mudbound*

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background of the Study

There are many kind of races in this world, some of them are black people, white people and yellow people. Black people refer to Negroid race and white people refer to Caucasian race while yellow people referring to Mongoloid race. The three types of races above are the main race types of the many races in the world, this was stated by Ruth Benedict and Gene Weltfish, they identified that there are three primary races in this world, Caucasian, Mongoloid and Negroid (1946: 10). From the three primary race types, various kinds of races emerge and begin to spread throughout the world. America a large country where their society comes from various kinds of ethnic and races. According to the book *Racial and Ethnic Relation in America*, McLemore stated "The United States of America is often described as a nation, as a country

where the population is a mixture of immigrants from all over the world" (1980: 1).

The diversity possessed by the United States often causes disputes, prejudices and discrimination that often occur because of differences between them. One of the things most visible due to diversity in America is discrimination about the Whites against the Blacks. Black people are made slaves, they do not have any rights unless they obey their master's orders. Even though there is no slavery now, there are still a lot of discrimination occurring on this earth. According to the book *Review Text in American History* by Irving L. Gordon, Africans started migrating to the United States in the late 1600s. Irving stated that "They –the Negroes- were brought from Africa, starting in 1619, when a shipment of Negroes arrived at Jamestown in the colony of Virginia" (1968: 315). Black people deliberately brought to America to be slaves,

white people assume that black people have a strong physically and can be paid cheaply.

The issue of racial discrimination is often made into a literary work because of the various stories that lie behind it. The work has its own purpose, some aim to show the horror of slavery or simply as a reminder that we should not do such a thing. One of the movies with the theme of prejudice and discrimination against African-American in America is *Mudbound*, a 2017 American period drama film directed by Dee Rees and written by Rees and Virgil Williams. This movie is based on the novel by Hillary Jordan with the same name.

The *Mudbound* takes the theme of racial discrimination with a different story, this time, is not the relationship between Master (White people) and Slaves (Black people), but two families of different races, they face the same difficult economic conditions and face inner struggles fade away human values. This has caught the writer attention and sparks several questions such as where they get the discrimination that is depicted in the movie and how has the African-American dealt with discrimination.

To conduct a more focused discussion, the writer will set the scope to make this project appropriate and prevent it from covering too wide of a matter. The writer wants to examine where the discrimination they experience and how they deal with it.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1 Intrinsic Elements

2.1.1. Character

Character is one of the most important parts of a movie. Characters in a movie are generally the same as characters in literary works, they have a narrative element and

visual portrayal of a character. Character is a form that is intentionally made to play a role in the story created by the author. In his book *The Bedford Introduction to Literature*, Michael Meyer explained “a character usually but not necessarily a person, it can be an object, animal or something else” (1990: 51). Meyer then added that “in a literary work, a character is very important, because without a character the plot of the story will not run as it should” (1990: 61).

Character is a form in a story that can be recognized according to their characteristic and behavior. Characters created by the author to convey the message in the story and hold an important role in the story because the characters determine how about the plot of the story. If the story does not have any characters, the narrative work will never be created.

2.1.2. Setting

Setting is the description made by the author about the time, place, and atmosphere of the events in the story. The characters in the story live at a certain place and time. In his book, Mayer stated "setting is the context in which actions of a story occurs" (1990:88). Setting of time is a setting that explains the time of events in the story while setting of place is a setting that states about the location or place where the story occurs.

Other definitions of setting are all information, flow guidelines relating to space, time and atmosphere. The setting includes a description of the geographical location, the time the story runs, the environment in which the story takes place.

2.2. Extrinsic Elements

2.2.1 Racism and Racial Discrimination

Lois Tyson in *Critical Theory Today* states that “Racism refers to the belief in racial superiority, inferiority, and purity based on

the conviction that moral and intellectual characteristics, just like physical characteristics, are biological properties that differentiate the races” (Tyson, 1950:360). Basically, people who are in dominant races are expected to be the superior, while the minorities are thought to be inferior. These dominant races will hate and avoid certain groups of people that belong to different races.

The concept of racism is often associated with discriminations towards the minority group. Discrimination means treating someone unfairly because of a personal characteristic such as their sex, race or age. Bowling, in his book *Racism, Crime, and Justice* stated that:

Discrimination consist of unequal, unfavorable and unjustifiable treatment based on a person’s sex, gender, ‘race’, ethnicity, culture, religion, language, class, sexual preference, age, physical disability or any other improper ground. It includes refusal to offer employment, pay fair wages, to provide housing or medical treatment or to provide a commercial or social service (2002: 38).

The discrimination which is based on the race of people is called racial discrimination. Racial discrimination is treating people differently through a process of social division into categories related to races. Racial discrimination involves explicit, direct hostility expressed by whites toward members of a disadvantaged racial group. Yet discrimination can include more than just direct behavior, it can also be subtle and unconscious (such as nonverbal hostility in posture or tone of voice). Furthermore, discrimination against an individual may be based on overall assumptions about members of a disadvantaged racial group that is assumed to apply to that individual. Discrimination

may also occur as the result of institutional procedures rather than individual behaviors.

2.2.2. Jim Crow Law

Jim Crow is the name of race-class system in South America and the Border, between 1877 and mid-1960s. In his book entitled *Jim Crow Laws and Racism in American History*, David K. Fremon stated that Jim Crow Law separated the Blacks from the Whites in public facilities or special facilities such as in schools, public transportation, hospital, and orphanages (2000:27). Jim Crow is not only as laws, but also as etiquettes which required that the Whites should have priority and are treated better than the Blacks, moreover the Blacks are exception to the treatment in public transportation and facilities, bureaucracy, justice, employment and the environment.

Jim Crow Law is shaped by the belief system: Whites are superior to Blacks in every way such as intelligence, morality, civilized behavior and others. Under Jim Crow Law, African-Americans people become second-class citizens.

3. RESEARCH METHOD

3.1 Method of Data Collection

To complete this final project the writer uses library research in collecting the data. Wellek and Warren in their book *Theory of Literature* stated that “since the majority of student can find their source materials in libraries, a knowledge of most important libraries and familiarity with catalogues as well as other reference books is undoubtedly an important equipment of almost every student of literature” (1977: 58). By using this method the writer collects the data and puts all into a research document and cites them as references for the research. In this case the writer uses *Mudbound* as the primary sources of research and related literatures as additional source also the other sources are internet.

3.2. Research Approach

Method of approach is needed to analyze a problem contained in the movie, the writer use sociological approach, according to Wellek and Warren stated:

“literature is a social institution, using as its medium language, a social creation. They are conventions and norm which could have arisen only in society. But, furthermore, literature represent ‘life’ and ‘life’ is, in large measure, a social reality, even though the natural world and the inner or subjective world of the individual have also been objects of literary ‘imitation’”

The writer can conclude that sociological approach a kind of literary approach that focuses on human problems and as a reflection of social life. The writer used this approach to analyze the social condition of black people who received racial discrimination depicted in the movie.

4. DISCUSSION

4.1. INTRINSIC ASPECTS

4.1.1. Characters

4.1.1.1. The White Family

4.1.1.1.1. Pappy

Pappy MacAllan was a widower and was the father of Jamie McAllan and Henry McAllan. Since the death of his wife, Pappy lives with his son Henry and Henry’s wife. Pappy was a racist, he didn’t like Black people especially slaves. This can be inferred from Henry and Jamie’s conversations while digging a tomb for his father at 00:01:58,618. When they were digging a tomb, they accidentally found a skull that they concluded as a slave skull because there was a bullet hole in his skull.

Henry : Jesus Christ!

Jamie : What is it?

Henry : It's a slave's grave.

Jamie : How do you know that?

Henry : Shot in the head, must've been a runaway. Well, that settles it.

Jamie : Settles what?

Henry : I ain't burying my father in no slave's grave. Nothing he would've hated more.

4.1.1.1.2. Jamie McAllan

Jamie MacAllan is the younger brother of Henry MacAllan. In World War II Jamie was a captain and pilot of a bomber plane. Jamie has a strict, cheerful nature but after returning from the Second World War, Jamie became a very different person, he was often drunk and sometimes got out of control. It is showed in the following conversation between Jamie and Henry at 01:41:27,748

Henry : You come and go as you please, you disappear for days on end, and when you are here, you're drunk.

Jamie : I don't answer to you.

Henry : When you're under my roof and you work on my farm, you do.

4.1.1.1.3. Henry McAllan

Henry MacAllan is the first son of Pappy McAllan and brother of Jamie. Henry has an engineering degree from Olee Miss University and he is the new owner of a plantation at Mississippi. Despite having a bachelor's degree in engineering, Henry was a reckless person. This can be seen at minute 00:23:36,623 when Henry visited the house that he thought he had bought, but apparently he was tricked because the house was in fact already owned by someone else. He just handed over money to the previous owner without making a black and white agreement.

Pappy : You get anything in writing?

Henry : No, Pappy, I shook on the deal. I gave him \$100, cash, right there in the front room.

Pappy : You got swindled, boy. Damn fool. Never thought a son of mine would be so damn stupid.

4.1.1.2. The Black Family

4.1.1.2.1. Hap Jackson

Hap Jackson is the head of the family of the Jackson family. The Jackson family is a Black family who works as a farmer. They worked on a plot of land belonging to the McAllan family. Hap Jackson is a hard-working man and someone who really appreciates time. This can be seen at minute 1:39:59,743 when Hap scolded one of his son for getting up too late.

Hap Jackson: It's half past nine. You just now gettin' up? So I guess you gonna lay around all day while your brothers and sisters work? Hmm? What's wrong with you, son?

4.1.1.2.2. Florence Jackson

Florence Jackson is Hap's wife. Raised in a family of slaves, Florence vowed never to take care of someone else's child like her mother. She will only raise her own child. This can be concluded by the writer from Florence Jackson's narrative at 00:40:05,319
Florence : I didn't have the luxury of only lovin' my own children. My own mother, I remember being blue. Blue from the dark of the mornin'. When the moon would still be up, she kissin' me and my sisters on the eyelids, us pretendin' to be asleep. She goin' off to work to wake and kiss some other woman's children in the sunlight. I swore that my own children would have all of me.

4.1.1.2.4. Ronsel Jackson

Ronsel is the firstborn son of the Jackson family who was sent to the battlefield as the commander of the tank forces. As a commander it is appropriate if he has a stocky body and a strict nature, In Europe, he was hailed as a war hero, but when he returned home, he feel like he was only a

young Black man. This can be seen from the conversation between Jamie and Ronsel at 01:34:46,097

Jamie : You ever miss it sometimes? Being over there. I don't mean being shot at, but sometimes, I actually miss it.

Ronsel : Yeah, me, too. Over there, I was a liberator. People lined up in the streets waiting for us. Throwing flowers and cheering, and here, I'm just another nigger pushing a plow.

4.1.2. Setting

4.1.2.1. Setting of Places

Setting of places in Mudbound movie is mainly on a farm in rural Mississippi. We can find out from the conversation between Pappy and Ronsel when they met in a shop at 01: 06: 25,856.

Pappy : Oh, oh! Well, that explains why you're tryin' to leave by the front door. You must be confused as to your whereabouts.

Ronsel : No, sir, I'm not confused at all.

Pappy : Oh, I think you are, boy. I don't know what they let you do over there, but you're in Mississippi now, nigger. You use the back door.

This was also reinforced by several scenes showing a cotton plantation in Mississippi



Picture 1 :
Mississippi
plantation (30:30)



Picture 2 : A man
picking cotton plants
(30:50)



Picture 3 : Henry is
in the plantation
(31:00)

Mississippi is located in Southern America, as we know, the southern part of America is the part that legalizes the practice of slaves. After Lincoln proclaimed the emancipation proclamation, the South was afraid that Lincoln would end slavery in the south. In 1861, Mississippi and other Southern agreed to secede or leave the union. This is one of the triggers of a civil war in America. After the end of the war and the practice of slavery was eliminated in the end of Mississippi and the southern part officially rejoined America. Although the practice of slavery has been eliminated, in fact there are still many white people who cannot or cannot accept to live together with black people. They are restricted themselves to black people, this is what triggered the emergence of the era of segregation and Jim Crow's law.

4.1.2.2. Setting of Time

Setting of time in *Mudbound* movie is around the 1940s during the second world war. This is based on the statement of the president of Roosevelt which was broadcast on radio that on December 7, 1941 Japan attacked America

President Roosevelt on Radio : December 7th, 1941, a date which will live in infamy. The United States of America was suddenly and deliberately attacked by naval and air forces of the Empire of Japan. The United States was at peace with that nation, and at the solicitation of Japan.

December 7, 1941 was the bombing of Pearl Harbor by Japanese imperial forces which dragged the United States into World War II. At that time black people were prohibited from joining the military. After thousands of black people lined up in Washington to demand equal employment rights, President Franklin D. Roosevelt issued Executive Order 8802 on June 25, 1941. This opened up national defense and other government jobs for all Americans

regardless of race, creed, color skin or national origin. Despite experiencing segregation and discrimination during their placement, black men and black women served valiantly in World War II. After the war ended, many black veterans met with prejudice and ridicule when they returned home. This is in sharp contrast to the reason why America entered the war - to defend freedom and democracy in the world.

4.2 Extrinsic Aspect

4.2.1. Discrimination Towards African-American

In *Mudbound* movie African American faced many of discrimination. Many of discrimination in this movie is one of the impact of segregation era. The segregation era is the era when African-American have a same right but it still distinguished between the Blacks from the Whites, so that it rises discrimination. In this part, the writer wants to explain where the discrimination they experience and how they deal with it.

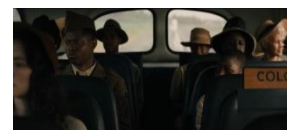
4.2.1.1. The Use of Public Area

Public area is a place that can be accessed or utilized by citizens or society for free without taking advantage and can be used by the community together both individually and in groups without exception, but in the *Mudbound* movie discrimination against African Americans is clearly visible in the public area such as inside the bus, at the cafe and on the market.

4.2.1.1.1. Inside the Bus



Picture 4 : The Whites sit on front row (01:04:12)



Picture 5 : The Blacks sit on the back row (01:04:52)



Picture 6 : Ronsel
joking with a little boy
(01:05:03)

The discrimination towards African-American inside the bus is showed in picture 4-6. The picture shows us a picture of the sitting position inside the bus, in the picture it shows Ronsel with other Blacks sitting on the back of the bus while the front is filled with White people. We can also see "Colored" on the top of the chair, the sign indicates that the Colored person must sit on the back of the bus. This happened because of the effect of Jim Crow Law which states "Separate but Equal". Black people can take public transportation but on condition they have to sit at the back of the bus.

The picture also shows the expression of Ronsel who was seen joking with a little boy beside him. The little boy paid his respects to Ronsel, he knew that Ronsel was a soldier who had just returned from the war. From the expressions seen, they seemed accustomed to sitting in the back of the bus. They did not seem to mind it, as long as they could use public transportation.

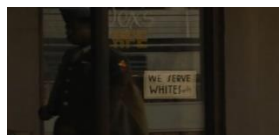
4.2.1.1.2. At The Cafe



Picture 7 : Ronsel
walked in front of a
cafe (01:05:02)



Picture 8 : Ronsel
looked at the sign
board (01:05:05)



Picture 9 : We serve
white only sign board
(01:05:07)

We can also see another picture of discrimination around a shop or cafe. If we look at picture 4 carefully, there we can read a sentence that is plastered in front of a cafe. The sentence reads "We Serve White Only". The writer conclude that the cafe does not to serve Black people. This also included discrimination because the cafe openly rejected Black customers. This also happened because of Jim Crow Law, the owner of the cafe could freely separate or rather choose not to serve Black people.

The photo above shows how Ronsel walked through a board that read "We serve white only" with no excessive expression. He seemed to understand his current position, he was only black. He realized that he did not have the privilege of spending time relaxing in a cafe.

4.2.1.1.3. Inside a Market

We can see the discrimination from the conversation between Ronsel and Pappy McAllan at 01: 06: 25,856. When Ronsel is on his way home from World War II, he took time to stop by a grocery store, in the shop he met Henry's wife. Ronsel wants to buy some grocery for his family at home. But when he was about to leave, unexpectedly Pappy and Henry would enter the store and then they were involved in a debate.

Henry's Wife : Pappy, this is Ronsel.Hap and Florence's son. Just returned from overseas.

Pappy : Oh, oh! Well, that explains why you're tryin' to leave by the front door. You must be confused as to your whereabouts.

Ronsel : No, sir, I'm not confused at all.

Pappy : Oh, I think you are, boy. I don't know what they let you do over there, but you're in Mississippi now, nigger. You use the back door.

Henry : Go on, son. Son, we don't want no trouble here. Go on.

Ronsel : You know what? You're absolutely right. When we was overseas, they didn't make us use the back door. General Patton put us on the front line. Yes, sir. You know what we did? We kicked the hell out of Hitler and them Jerries. While y'all at home safe and sound.

From the conversation above we can assume that Black people have no right to go out through the front door, Black people can only use the back door. Ronsel looked like he wanted to fight the Pappy's words, as a front-line soldier, he did not accept when he was told to get out through the back door. The back door is identical to the worker's door, because if the workers use the front door they will disturb the customers. However, he could not do it. If he fought he had to face a white people so he reluctantly left the market through the back door

The effect of Jim Crow Law is clearly seen here, even though they have the right to shop like white people but still they have to separate, go out using the back door for example. This incident is similar to the incident on the bus where Black people can only sit on the back of the bus while the front seats are specifically for white people.

4.2.1.1.4. At The Battlefield

Ronsel experienced different treatments when he was on duty in the second world war, this can be proven from the conversation between Jamie and Ronsel at 01:35:50,369. Ronsel tells Jamie that he and the other Black soldiers got different treatments.

Jamie : You ever been with a white girl? Shit, well... I'll be damned. Huh? Oh, yeah? Tell me.

Ronsel : Army gave us separate barracks, separate blood supply, separate latrines. But

them European girls didn't have a problem with us at all.

Jim Crow's legal effect was also affected when the world war was underway. From the conversation above it can also be concluded that Ronsel feel that they don't deserve such treatment. This is reinforced by Ronsel's expression that looks sad in the picture 10-12. He felt that during the war, everyone should unite with each other to win the victory, but what happens here is a bit sad, even though he and the other black people join in the struggle to fight the war but in fact they still get discrimination. However, after all they could not do anything and they still fought tenaciously to win the second world war.



Picture 10 : Ronsel told Jamie a story

(01:35:50)



Picture 11 : Ronsel Feel Sad

(01:35:51)



Picture 12 : Ronsel's facial expression

4.2.1.2. Employment Opportunities

Work is very important and it is needed by all people to live out their life. But, getting a job for African American people was not easy because there is discrimination against them. The discrimination in employment can be seen from conversation by the Jackson family while they were eating together at 00:19:49,313

Hap's daughter : That's why I'm not gonna be no farmer. I'm gonna be a stenographer.

Hap's son : A Ste... what?
Florence : It's kind of like a
typist.
Hap's son : They don't allow no
colored typists.
Hap : Your sister will be
the first!.

Black people are very restricted in getting a job. Being a stenographer, for example, Hap's children thought that his sister's dream of becoming a stenographer was just a dream, because Black people were not allowed to take that kind of jobs.

From the conversation above it can be concluded that they realize that they have not been able to get a decent job, but they do not stop hoping that someday there will be someone who is able to eliminate the separation of their people. This can be concluded from the Hap's word, he believe that his daughter one day will become a stenographer.

5. CONCLUSION

This final project discusses the racial discrimination between Black and White people in the United States during Jim Crow Law era that is depicted in Dee Ree's movie entitled *Mudbound*. The writer uses sociological approach supporting by Jim Crow Law theory by Fremon and racism theory by Tyson. The writer analyzes both intrinsic and extrinsic elements of the movie since it is necessary to completely understand the portrayal of racial discrimination and the Jim Crow Law through the settings, characters, and conflicts.

The writer finds that the discrimination towards African-American in Dee Rees's *Mudbound* are clearly visible. The discrimination they experience are caused by Jim Crow Law. The law regulates the separation or the segregation between

the Whites and the Blacks. The segregation leads to inequality in life between the Blacks and the Whites. The movement of black people is restricted everywhere, especially in public facilities. To use public transportation such as buses, the Blacks must always sit at the back of the bus. They are not allowed to sit in the front. The rules were very clear, in the middle of the bus there is usually a note stating that the Blacks had to sit in the back of the bus. The Blacks also cannot go into a store or restaurant carelessly. Sometimes there is a store that clearly display a sign in front of the store that black people were not allowed to go inside. Even if allowed, they are only allowed to enter the store using the back door as the front door should only be used for the Whites.

In addition to public facilities, the authors found that discrimination also occurs when they want to apply for a job. They are still considered second-class society so it will be difficult for them to get good jobs.

Being humiliated and abused does not mean that black people do not want to fight. They actually want to fight, but because the applicable law is very burdensome for them, in the end they can only be silent and tend to be passive. They think that to make a difference they need extraordinary people.

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