

Reflection of Racial Discrimination in “Freedom Writers” Film’s Dialogs

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Abstrak – Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk merefleksikan diskriminasi rasial yang tertuang dalam dialog film karya Richard La Gravense yang berjudul *Freedom Writers* (2007). Film ini menceritakan tentang seorang guru berkulit putih yang bernama Erin Gruwell yang mencoba menyelesaikan konflik rasial yang terjadi diantara murid-muridnya di Woodrow Wilson Highschool in Long Beach, California. Film *Freedom Writers* (2007) menggambarkan bagaimana pendidikan yang "membebaskan" bisa menjadi mercusuar di tengah maraknya bentrokan geng yang menyeret para siswa ke dalam siklus kekerasan. Berdasarkan kisah nyata, *Freedom Writers* yang pertama kali debut di layar lebar pada tahun 2007, memberikan kesan kuat betapa fundamentalnya peran pendidikan. Pendekatan penelitian ini adalah deskripsi kualitatif. Data dianalisa berdasarkan teori tipe-tipe diskriminasi dari Fred L. Pincus dan teori stigma dari Erving Goffman. Hasil dari penelitian ini menyimpulkan bahwa di dalam dialog film tersebut para karakter mengalami dua jenis tindak diskriminasi rasial yaitu diskriminasi individu dan diskriminasi kelembagaan. Selain itu, perlakuan tersebut berdampak pada terjadinya prasangka hingga mengakibatkan kekerasan antar kelompok ras.

Kata Kunci: Analisa film, diskriminasi ras, prasangka dan kekerasan

Abstract - This research aims to reflect on racial discrimination contained in the dialogue of Richard La Gravense's film *Freedom Writers* (2007). This film tells the story of a white teacher named Erin Gruwell who tries to resolve the racist conflict that occurred among her students at Woodrow Wilson High School in Long Beach, California. The film depicts how "liberating" education can be a beacon amid raging gang clashes that drag many children into a cycle of violence. Based on a true story, *Freedom Writers*, which debuted for the first time on the big screen in 2007, gives a strong impression of how fundamental the role of education is. This research approach is qualitative description. Data were analyzed based on Fred L. Pincus' theory of types of discrimination and Erving Goffman's theory of stigma. The results of this research conclude that in the dialogue of the film, the characters experience two types of acts of racial discrimination, namely individual discrimination and institutional discrimination. Apart from that, this treatment has an impact on prejudice, resulting in violence between racial groups.

Keywords: film analysis, racial discrimination, prejudice, and violence.

INTRODUCTION

In the social sphere, humans consist of various races, ethnicities, creeds, or skin colors. Some races that exist make differences between one race and another. This diversity often triggers racial tensions and leads to racism. The issue of racism is very vulnerable to occur in countries that have multicultural societies. In these multicultural countries, acts of racism are a sensitive matter. According to Castle (1993), "Racism is a racist issue that is deeply rooted in the lives of multicultural societies in various parts of the world." Meanwhile, racial discrimination occurs when one person is treated inferiorly to another because of a different race, color, nationality, or ethnicity. United Nations defines racial discrimination as any distinction, exclusion, restriction, or preference based on race, color, ancestry, ethnicity, or ethnic origin, denying equal recognition, enjoyment, or exercise, or has the purpose or effect of undermining human and fundamental rights. Many fields of social science use this definition of discrimination to refer to unequal treatment due to racial differences (Blank, 2004).

So far, rampant acts of racism can be seen mostly in the United States. Racism and discrimination occurred in America from around the 17th century as a result of the slave trade initiated by European colonial countries. Merritt in "The Triangular Trade" tells that the North American continent was successfully explored by France



and Great Britain in the 17th century as a form of territorial expansion and was triggered by a feeling of not wanting to lose out to Spain and Portugal who had already explored South America. Later on, Great Britain and the United States had a mutualistic relationship where the US was present as an arms supplier to Europe while Europe carried out various trade collaborations, including the slave trade. In the beginning, European people never claimed to be white (Whites). Nor do they see their whiteness as an added value. The word "white" was originally intended for European people and was first used by Thomas Middleton in the play *The Triumph of Truth* which was staged in the early 15th century. This drama tells the story of a king in Africa who was among the British and said, "I see astonishment on the faces of these white people." In the era before the play, dark-skinned characters were described by physical characteristics such as "blackish" or "grayish brown". However, this description was never intended to differentiate or deem them inferior to white people. The description black also refers to many groups, such as Spaniards, Arabs, and Indians. Differences in skin color, which are the basis for racial differentiation, are a factual reality. However, the concept of race itself does not actually originate from biological reality. Race is an idea, not a fact. Geraldine Heng, a history professor from the University of Texas, said that there is a process called race-making. This process leads to practices and pressure to construct human identity, resulting in a higher level of one human group compared to other human groups. In short, race is something imagined, identified, and institutionalized by power. According to Kwame Anthony Appiah, professor of philosophy and law from New York University, race is the result of a construction of cultural biologizing and/or ideology, not a scientific idea. As all rights and powers were given to white people only, racism began to emerge in the United States. A spotlight case of racism that occurred lately happened when a white police officer "killed" George Floyd, a 46-year-old black man (the New York Times, May 31, 2020). Minneapolis police officers arrested him after a convenience store employee called 911 and told police that Floyd used counterfeit \$20 bills to buy cigarettes. On May 25, 17 minutes after the first police car arrived on the scene, Mr. Floyd was immobilized by three officers, was unconscious, and showed no signs of life. The day after Floyd's death, police fired all four officers involved in the incident. On May 29, Hennepin County Attorney Mike Freeman charged third-degree murder and second-degree murder against police officer Derek Chauvin, who appeared most prominently in a witness video showing Mr. Floyd pinned to the ground. He was convicted of the manslaughter of the highest degree. The time-stamped video, analyzed by The Times, shows Mr. Chauvin, a white man, holding his knee on Mr. Floyd's neck for at least 8 minutes and 15 seconds. A video investigation showed that Chauvin did not release his knees for 1 minute and 20 seconds after paramedics arrived on the scene, even after Floyd lost consciousness.

This phenomenon is the idea of people who have experienced and experienced racism for themselves to present the situation in the form of literary works and films. Weltek and Werren (in Klarer, 2004) wrote that "Literature is an imaginative and creative human idea that is expressed in a literary work.". Meanwhile, Film is one type of work in the form of audiovisual media. According to Effendi (2019) film is defined as a cultural product and a means of artistic expression. Film as mass communication is a combination of various technologies such as photography and sound recording, art both fine arts and literary and architectural theater arts and musical arts.

Along with the development of the world of literary & film studies, there have been many works that carry themes around social issues such as racism which can be seen and can be found, one of which is in a film entitled *Freedom Writers* by Richard La Gravenese, produced by Paramount. The film tells the story of the struggle of a white teacher named Erin Gruwell who tries to resolve racist conflicts that have occurred between her students at Woodrow Wilson High School in Long Beach, California, especially in class 203. In the film, there are four racial groups, namely African-American or black, Asian, Hispanic, and white people, and each character from each race is described differently. There are some similar studies done by several people from different universities that analyzed social issues that relate to racism. Gabriella (2018) and Indriyani (2019) analyzed a similar object that's is Jay Asher's *13 Reasons Why*. Gabriella focused on analyzing what kinds of bullying were experienced by the main character, Hannah Baker, and the impacts of bullying on Hannah Baker's behavior. Whereas Indriyani focused on the egoistic behavior of the main character. Another study by Saputra (2014) is entitled *Manifestation of Racism in Blood Diamond Film*. This study focused on analyzing the racism which is reflected in *Blood Diamond* film. He applied white supremacy theory in analyzing racism depicted in the *Blood Diamond* film. The result of his study was to show the manifestation of racism reflected in *Blood Diamond* film. Another study by Nensia (2020) entitled *Racism towards African Americans in Peter Farrelly's Green Book: A True Story*. This study focused on analyzing the racial discrimination towards African Americans in *Green Book* films. This study used a sociological approach to describe the racist act toward colored people in America. The result of this study was to describe the racial discrimination towards African Americans in *Green Book* films.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The descriptive qualitative approach is applied in this study as the writer used dialogs in a film script as the object

for this study to be analyzed in essay form. Kuckartz (2013) underscored that the qualitative approach is diverse in terms of its data are usually texts that can be taken from words, sentences utterances, or even pictures, and so on. Furthermore, Peshkin (in Mason, 2002) states that qualitative research usually serves one or more of these purposes, description, interpretation, verification, and evaluation. In addition, According to Punch (1998), Qualitative research is empirical research in which the data is not in the form of numbers. This approach is full of description which is in essay form rather than in numeric form like the quantitative approach. Therefore, this study is concerned with essay form rather than statical one to analyze the topic.

Literature and film have similarities in that both are mediums for the author's expression. Literature and film also have similarities in that they both have both types of fiction and non-fiction. However, the biggest similarity is between films and dramas where both have similar elements such as storyline, characterization, conflict, etc. This is the reason why many experts have adopted films as objects of literary study. The popularity of films as an object in literary studies has strengthened since the massive adaptation of literary works into films, for example, novels. In several decades, a series of films that have been commercially successful and have received academic appreciation are the result of the transformation of novels. In the history of Hollywood cinema, for example, *The Godfather I, II, III* by Mario Puzo, *The Lord of the Rings* by Tolkien, *Dan Brown's Davinci Code*, and J.K.'s *Harry Potter*. Rowling is an example of novels that have been adapted into films. Therefore, in this study, data are the quotations or sentences from the film *Freedom Writers* (2007) script which can be the character's monolog or dialog. Moreover, Social issues depicted in the film were analyzed using Fred L. Pincus' theory of types of discrimination and Erving Goffman's theory of stigma. According to Pincus (2006), there are three types of racial discrimination consisting of individual discrimination, institutional discrimination, and structural discrimination. According to Goffman (1963), racism is part of the stigma and discrimination in society that can lead to many consequences, mainly prejudice and violence.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In the film's dialogue, the teacher explains that white, black, Asian, and Latino people in Long Beach have been fighting for a long time. They injure and kill each other to defend their territory, pride, and respect for their race. In this film, Erin Gruwell, played by Hillary Swank, uses a different teaching method with the aim can destroying the dividing wall created between her students because of their racial differences. She uses interactive learning methods. Besides that, she approaches her students by distributing books related to social life, one of which is *The Diary of Anne Frank* which seems to work in bridging their racial differences.

1. Types of racial discrimination reflected in the dialogs

a. Individual discrimination

In Eva's monologue, she mentions that the city or school feels like a prison divided into groups based on race. Eva also mentions how each race disrespects the other as she does in her monologue where she calls black people "Ghetto" which in the United States refers to a part of the city inhabited by black people. In addition, Eva also calls it "Wonder Bread Land" which is often associated with a symbol of discrimination



Picture 1

Dialog 1

Erin : Alright, you know what? I want you all to move to this side of the room. You in the back up here. Sindy and all of you, move to the back. Come on. Let's go. Now!
Jamal : Get your ass back to China, all of y'all (Gruwell, p. 6)

In dialog 1, there is individual discrimination in which Jamal, who is one of the black people in class 203, mocks Asians by telling them to go back to "China" which in fact not all Asians come from China. Goffman (1963: 30) states that normal people or society provide acts of taunts to stigmatized people so that the stigmatized person feels hurt. Jamal's actions aim to taunt and hurt the feelings of the Asians in his class.



Picture 2.

Dialog 2

Eva : White people always wanting their respect like they deserve it for free.
Erin : I'm teacher. It doesn't matter what color I am.
Eva : It's all about color. It's about people deciding what you deserve, about people wanting what they don't deserve, about whites thinking they run this world no matter what. You see, I hate white people. (Gruwell, p. 8)

In this dialog, Eva expresses her frustration by saying how the superior treatment that white people always get in comparison. According to Eva, white-skinned people always get justification for what they do or what they want even though it is something that is not right. Through this dialog, it can be found how people will behave based on certain groups.

b. Institutional discrimination

Institutional discrimination can be found when one of the teachers discriminates against students from class 203 by not allowing Erin Gruwell as a teacher from class 203 to borrow the books for students from her class (data 1). This clearly shows the discrimination committed by the teacher against students in class 203, which is dominated by minority groups. This type of discrimination makes students from class 203 unable to get equal rights and opportunities in education at school. In addition to discriminating against the right of students in class 203 to use books in the library, the teacher also belittles students in class 203 about the learning capabilities of students in class 203.



Picture 3.

Dialog 3

Mrs. Campbell : You can't make someone want an education. The best you can do is try to get them to obey, to learn discipline. That would be a tremendous accomplishment for them. (Gruwell, p. 10)

In the next data, another teacher Brian underestimates the learning capabilities of the students in class 203. According to Goffman (1963:8) that people or groups who have different appearances such as minorities will be underestimated by society as the majority. In this case, because class 203 is dominated by Afro-American students, he considers them only capable of giving fear by using automatic weapons and ruins the school.



Picture 4.

Dialog 4

Brian : Yeah. God, listen to what you're saying. How dare you compare them to Anne Frank? They don't hide. They drive around in the open with automatic weapons. I'm the one living in fear. I can't walk out my

door at night.

Erin : And you blame these kids?

Brian : This was an A-list school before they came here. And look what they turned it into. I mean, does it make sense that kids who want an education should suffer because their high school gets turned into a reform school? Because kids who don't want to be here, and shouldn't be here, are forced to be here by the geniuses running the school district? Integration's a lie. Yeah, we teachers, we can't say that or we lose our job for being racist. So, please stop your cheerleading, Erin. You're ridiculous. You don't know the first thing about these kids. And you're not qualified to make judgements about the teachers who have to survive this place. (Gruwell, p. 10)

The dialogue above shows the existence of institutional discrimination behavior where in his dialog he said "They don't hide. They drive around in the open with automatic weapons. I'm the one living in fear. I can't walk out my door at night." That is the prejudice of an institutional teacher, where in the dialog Brian as one of the teachers at the school blames the students in class 203 for the gang violence that often occurs in the area. In addition, in another dialog he also said "Because kids who don't want to be here, and shouldn't be here" where in this dialog Briant underestimates the students in class 203 of their learning capabilities and assumes them not be able to pursue education at school.

2. Impacts of racial discrimination reflected in the dialogs

a. Prejudice

The immediate effects of racism are prejudice between one race and another eventually leads to physical violence between groups.



Picture 5.

Dialog 5

Erin : Switch with Ben. Come on.

Ben : I can't go back there alone.

Erin : It'll be fine.

Ben : No, it won't

Sindy : I'm not sitting near him.

Jamal : I ain't going up there without my homey.

Sindy : I'm not sitting back there alone! (Gruwell, p. 6)

In dialog 5 above, Ben, as the only white student in 203, refuses Mrs. Gruwell's order to change seats where he is asked to sit with students in his class who are of other races. This is because Ben feels uncomfortable being among classmates of other races because he knows how people from his classmates' groups dislike people from his group. Goffman (1963) points out that people with stigma try to distance themselves from contact with society or normal people and avoid direct contact with normal people. As the only white student in his class and being the minority in his class makes Ben avoid interactions with his classmates who are mostly filled with other races.



Picture 6.

Dialog 6

Erin : You hate me?

Eva : Yeah.

Erin : You don't know me.

Eva : I know what you can do. I saw white cops shoot my friend in the back for reaching into his pocket! His pocket. I saw white cops break into my house and take my father for no reason except because they feel like it! Except because they can. And they can because they're white. So I hate white people on sight! (Gruwell, p. 8)

In dialogue 6, Eva shows generalized prejudice towards Mrs. Gruwell because Mrs. Gruwell comes from a white group of people. Eva's bad experience with white-skinned people caused Eva's hatred towards all white-skinned people. This is shown in her dialog "I know what you can do. I saw white cops shoot my friend in the back for reaching into his pocket! His pocket. I saw white cops break into my house and take my father for no reason except because they feel like it! Except because they can. And they can because they're white. So I hate white people on sight!".

b. Violence

The occurrence of individual discrimination and institutional discrimination certainly has an impact on the characters in the story. Racial discrimination here finally caused violence reflected in the story.



Picture 7.

Dialog 7

(There starts to be noise and people running in the hall. Something is going on. Everyone is confused in class. They all start run out)

Erin : Wait! Wait! Please, stay in your seats! Wait! Stay in your seats! Please! (She goes out to see what's going on out there. Gangs fighting. It's war. Even Eva and Sindy are fighting). (Gruwell, p. 4)

The scene above where groups or races are often at odds, which in turn often causes gang violence or violence between members of different groups or races.

CONCLUSION

Freedom Writers film raises the theme of racism and discrimination set in a school called Woodrow Wilson High School in Long Beach, California. The racial diversity in the class triggers acts of racism and discrimination that form individual discrimination and institutional discrimination. Several dialogs revealed how teachers at school often commit acts of racism and also discrimination against students from racial minorities from the 203 class. These forms of racial discrimination certainly have an impact that often arises in the form of prejudice thrown between members of each race. Eventually, the impacts of racial discrimination in the film led to violence that resulted in social tension between races. The results of the analysis show that environments with various races and ethnicities pose their own threats and challenges in unifying common perceptions or concepts, both at the classroom level specifically and at the community level in general.

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