

OPPRESSION AND RACISM TOWARD BLACK AMERICAN IN “12 YEARS A SLAVE” MOVIE

*Swi Idayati Simanjuntak

**Sri Minda Murni

ABSTRACT

Simanjuntak, Swi Idayati. 2015. Oppression and Racism toward Black American in “12 Years a Slave” Movie. A Thesis. Faculty of Languages and Arts. State University of Medan.

The study deals with those oppressions faced by Black American in “12 Years a Slave” movie and what resistances they showed toward those oppressions. The objectives of the study are to describe the oppressions faced by the two main characters – Platt and Patsey and to explain the resistances they shown in “12 Years a Slave” Movie. This research focuses the study merely on oppression faced by two main characters; they were Salomon Northup or Platt and Patsey. This research was conducted by using descriptive qualitative design and limited on two of main characters. The data analysis result was found five kinds of oppression faced by black American in this film, those were: powerlessness, exploitation, marginalization, culture imperialism and violence. The resistances shown by American toward those oppressions were revolt, radicalism, asking for help and religion or spirituality. The issue of racism with oppression had been the crucial issue since long time ago which could not be denied that until nowadays the issue of racism is still happening though without oppression. The stigma of Black was being inferior and white was being superior had driven mind into the destruction of race relationship between Black and White. However, in this film we could see how badly the oppression faced by black American and how they struggled for fighting toward those oppressions.

Keyword: *oppression and racism, resistances, script, 12 years a slave movie.*

* Graduate Status

**Lecturer Status

INTRODUCTION

Along the history of America Nation, this country is well known as a diversity country which the society came from those immigrants who spread everywhere. For instance, it would be found many Blacks, Latinos, Asians, etc as the result of immigration. Back to the history, undoubtedly America had so many histories and timelines which show how actually a change appeared from the dark history into the brighter ones. One of the major issues was slavery related to racism.

It was obviously known that slavery related to racism had been major issues in America even in some countries even up today. Slavery was the impact of social injustice which spread because of color differences. The Oxford Dictionary which indicated that before sixteenth century Black mean soil, dirty, foul, atrocious, horrible and wicked, became one of the reasons the stigma spread upon Black. This indicated that Whites felt superior toward 'colored skin' and those colored skins especially Black were forced to think that they were inferior towards White. This obviously made many Black, Latinos and Asians experienced disrespectful treatments, poor services, prejudiced comments because of their ethnicity or color. Racism which was categorized as serious problem could happen whoever since it related to life. Life has many elements and differences in terms of biological concept. Life also could not be separated from human and human rights, rights for having prosperity, rights for living as what humans do, and the most rights for being admitted as the same of God's creation. Even though racism with oppression did not happen in Indonesia but those who called as human need to learn much how to appreciate those differences either biologically or ideologically. This would also be hoped as a reminder to Indonesian about the Tragedy of Ambon 'Religious Intolerance' in 1990 which was the most dangerous and sensitive tragedy which brought much harm.

Those explanations above became the center analysis why the writer chose its topic and movie. The most important one, this research was hoped will give benefit to those who read, especially young generation to be conscious toward this issue and keep opening mind up to those differences and learning how to respect one each other.

Thus, the research problems of the study were; what oppressions were faced by the two main characters – Platt and Patsey – in "12 Years a Slave" movie and what resistances did they show toward its oppression. To uncover the questions above, the researcher conducted the research using theory of oppression by Irish Young (1990).

Racism

Race is physical characteristics that distinguish one race to another such as color, skin pigmentation, lip form, etc. As have been known commonly recognized some racial types: Caucasoid, Mongoloid and Negroid. However these differences often

made particular stigmas which finally brought to the destruction or discrimination race.

According to Kleg as cited in *Racism, Crime and Justice* (Bowling and Philips, 2002: 21) racism is the belief that certain groups are innately, biologically, socially, morally superior to other groups, based on what is attributed to be their racial composition. Undoubtedly the concept which had been uprooted in mind cannot be denied that treated different groups unfairly, prejudice comments and bad services.

The Oxford English Dictionary indicated that before the sixteenth century black meant "soil, dirty, foul ... atrocious, horrible, and wicked." To the first Europeans who explored Africa and encountered blacks the difference of color made a profound impression and, in the long run, skin color defined the relationship between blacks and whites (Dinnerstein, 1990: 17). This becomes the proof that Black was categorized as lowered class and had suffered of being discriminated since long time ago. Black which was categorized as lowered class often humiliated or degraded in society and it related to the slavery which happened long time ago. Actually discrimination race could happen to anybody, no matter who you are but the most important somebody who discriminated were those who categorized as weak and lowered class. 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 (Bowling, 2002: 38).

At last racism is one of most disturbing phenomena of the great revolution of modern world. At the very time when industrial civilization is penetrating to all points of the globe and is uprooting men of every color from their age-old traditions, a doctrine, speciously scientific in appearance, is invoked in order to rob these men of their full share in the advantage of the civilization forced upon them (Leiris, 1963: 8).

Oppression

Oppression is a condition of doing unjust or cruel exercise of authority or condition of being weighed down, pressing down and destructing mind or physical. According to Barker (2003) the oppressed individual or group is devalued, exploited and deprived of privileges by the individual or group which has more power. This indicated that usually somebody who do oppression they who have much power or authority.

Types of Oppression

According to Young (1990: 48) there are five kinds of oppressions, they are exploitation, marginalization, culture imperialism, powerlessness and violence. They are:

1. Exploitation

Exploitation is one of oppression which faced the Black in slavery by Whites in order to get advantage from slaves. Exploitation enacts a structural relation between social groups. Social rules about what work is, who does what for whom, how work is compensated, and the social process by which the results of work are appropriated operate to enact relations of power and inequality.

2. Marginalization

Young (1990: 53) defines that marginals are people the system of labor cannot or will not use. Marginalization in some ways is much worse than exploitation since society has decided that it cannot or will not use these people even for labor. Marginalization expels or pushes a whole category of people from useful participation in social life. As a result, these groups are subjected to severe material deprivation (they do not have access to basic resources) and even extermination (such as genocide).

3. Powerlessness

Young (1990: 56) states that the powerless are those who lack authority or power even in this mediated sense, those over whom power is exercised without their exercising it; the powerless are situated so that they must take orders and rarely have the right to give them. The idea of powerlessness links to Marx's theory of socialism: some people "have" power while others "have-not". The powerless are dominated by the ruling class and are situated to take orders and rarely have the right to give them.

4. Culture Imperialism

Young (1990: 59) says that culture imperialism involves taking the culture of the ruling class and establishing it as the norm. According to Helsinki as cited in *Justice and the Politics of Difference* defines cultural imperialism as the economic, technological and cultural hegemony of the industrialized nations, which determines the direction of both economic and social progress, defines cultural values, and standardizes the civilization and cultural environment throughout the world.

5. Violence

Violence is probably the most obvious and visible oppression from those oppressions. Those groups who have power however often oppressed or humiliated lowered class. Young (1990: 61) includes the category less severe incidents of harassment, intimidation, or ridicule simply for the purpose of degrading, humiliating or stigmatizing group members. Young (1990: 61) also states that in American society, women, Blacks, Asians, Arabs, gay men, and lesbians live under such threats of violence. All forms of sexual violence and hate crimes are prevalent examples of violent oppression.

“12 Years a Slave”

12 Years a slave was a 2013 historical drama film and an adaptation of the 1853 slave narrative memoir *Twelve Years a Slave* by Salomon Northup, a New York State free African American man who has kidnapped in Washington D. C and sold into slavery in 1841. This movie was based on true story about how actually life of Salomon Northup who was one of slaves and how he struggled to be free from enslavement. This film was directed by Steve McQueen and the screenplay was written by John Ridley. Salomon Northup was a New York State-born free African American who was kidnapped in Washington, D.C., and sold into slavery in 1841 and rescued in 1853. By the time of experiences being a slave, in 1855 he wrote his life experiences and finally is published with the same title “*Twelve Years a Slave*”.

Methodology

This study was conducted by using descriptive qualitative method to identify and analyze the oppression and racism toward Black American in “12 Years a Slave” movie. The source of the data was “12 Years a Slave” movie which was downloaded from YouTube. The data were those utterances whether they were statements, dialogues (conversations among the characters), monologue (broadly speech by one person), or the actions of two main characters which were taken from the script of “12 Years a Slave” Movie.

In this research the techniques for collecting such downloading “12 Years a Slave” movie and the movie script from YouTube and collecting those utterances, statements and dialogues from the script which was related to oppression related to racism and resistances.

After collecting data, the researcher had analyzed the data by using descriptive analysis based on Young’s theory. The techniques for analyzing data were classified the utterances, statements and dialogues which were involved into kinds of oppressions and then explained what resistances shown by the two main characters toward those oppressions they faced.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Result

After the data were collected, there were found 51 statements or dialogues of oppression which included into five kinds of oppression. They were exploitation, marginalization, powerlessness, culture imperialism and violence. There were also found that Black fought for getting free in terms of resistances which were shown by the two main characters – Platt and Patsey. Those resistances were revolt, radicalism, asking for help and religion or spirituality. The result showed that along the slavery era in United States there were so much miserable sorrows faced those slaves. This proved that however slavery which was the result of racism extremely gave much harm to those who faced it. But however it could not be denied that slaves also human who felt pain normally. Though they realized they were slaves which their power on White, they also found a time when they needed

to be free. It was proved when they did some resistances such as revolt, radicalism, asking for help and the last religion or spirituality.

Discussion

After collecting and analyzing the data based on oppression's theory, it was found that all kinds of oppression occurred in 12 Years a Slave movie. Black also fought for getting free in terms of resistances; it was found there were four resistances were shown by two main characters toward those oppressions.

Oppressions toward Black American

1. Exploitation

Exploitation is the action or fact which treating someone unfairly in order to benefit from their work. Exploitation was usually done when a group had the power and the other was not. In 12 Years a Slave movie, the action of exploitation was done in order to get benefit from Black. Black which were the slaves were sold into the market and treated them just like the property.

*Clemens : I would be just as certain **they are counting the money paid for delivering you to this place.***

Salomon :They were not kidnappers. They were artist. Fellow performers.

Clemens : You know that? You know for certain who they were?

*Clemens : How I reckon the situation: whatever past we had. . . well, that's done now. The reality to come is us being transported southward. New Orleans if I were to venture. **After we arrive, we'll be put to market. Beyond that. . . well, once in a slave state I suppose there is only one outcome.***

The stigma which had been buried deeply on white's mind finally drove them to do anything on Black for getting advantage.

One of the tragic exploitation being made by the white was when they were displayed as if livestock with each price based on their talent.

Freeman : Mr Ford. Splendid seeing you, sir. What catches your fancy? This lad? He's very brawny.

Mr. Ford : How much for the ones Platt and Eliza?

*Freeman : Ah Yes. **A Thousand for Platt. This is a nigger of considerable talent. I assure you. Seven hundred for Eliza. My fairest price.***

Actually the conversation above combination of being exploited and having no power to refuse or fight since there were two sides for sure namely getting the advantage and the other one the object of being humiliated which could not fight.

2. Marginalization

Marginalization is the act of relegating a group of people to a lower social class standing or outer limit or edge of society. In this film those Black were being marginalized, the only reason for white doing that because of they were black.

*Tibeats : Are you an engineer, or a nigger?
Are you an engineer or a nigger?*

*Tibeats : It's a scheme. Plenty of engineers have schemed similarly.
The passes are too tight.*

Whatever black were doing, they were used to be wrong in the eyes of White. They did not respect them as human being even they did not believe every step they took. Black as the lowered class were often got unfair deeds, being marginalized or experienced powerlessness, the only reason for that just because they were black and no needed in social life.

*Epps : Whoa! Joyous day, joyous day. Dark time is behind us.
Clean living and prayer done lifted the plague! As thick and
white as New England snow. Now my nigger is returned to
me. Hears Judge Turner gave you favor. **Did you beguile
him, Platt, with your slick nigger ways?** You won't stand
idle, boy. Not on my land. Much work to do.*

The stigma of black which was often categorized as foul, evil, fool had been a bridge become being marginalized. It was quite hard to find any man to trust them since the stigma had become ideologies on their mind. White believed that they were born as the ugliest, talentless and miserable men. Based on this film, there was a standard over the Black, if anyone liked them it seemed like impossible; it must be any something wrong either on them or the addressee.

3. Powerlessness

Powerlessness means having no power to do or stop something. There was a significant difference between Black and white Americans which finally drove their fate of being superior and inferior. This was definitely shown that being Blacks meant being inferior over White. The relationship between superior and inferior was totally proved of being powerless. White Americans which were superior handled all side of Blacks' life, they decided what they wore, what they ate and what became they were. White really realized their power over the black which finally brought to the dark destiny. This condition made Black cannot do anything unless they would be a dead nigger.

*Clemens Ray : If you want to survive, do and say as little possible. Tell
no one who you really are and tell no one that you can
read and write. **Unless you want to be a dead nigger.***

Besides Black realized that they could do nothing, the slave master also often made particular rules upon their slaves. Being a slave meant being a property which having no right to protest, claim the rules even to breathe freely. When slave master made a rule upon them, surely it really made them suffering.

*Master Epps` : "And that servant which knew his lord's will . . . WHICH KNEW HIS LORD'S WILL and prepared not himself . . . PREPARED NOT HIMSELF, neither did according to his will, shall be beaten with many stripes . . . " D'ye hear that? "Stripes." That nigger that don't take care, that don't obey his lord – that's his master – d'ye see? – **that 'ere nigger shall be beaten with many stripes. Now, "many" signifies a great many. Forty, a hundred, a hundred and forty, a hundred and fifty lashes . . . That's a Scriver!***

Master Epps tried to claim what scripture stated to his coarse rules. He stated that in Bible if a slave did not do as what his Lord's wish, they would be stroked as his Lord wanted. The point to be a powerless side toward Blacks was, Epps tried to claim as what scripture said to become his rule, in fact he was even not Lord. This rule really brought to the endless miseries for those slaves. They just could do as what Epps said unless they would be beaten, tortured or murdered. Having been limited by the harsh rules, surely slaves' life was really a hell.

Being slaves surely made the black suffering. But being a Black and a woman probably was the darkest fate upon black. Patsey was. Patsey who was 23 year black woman experienced disrespectful treatments and being raped repeatedly by his Master – Master Epps .

*Mistress Shaw: I know what it like to be the object of Master's predilections and peculiarities. **A lusty visit in the night or a visitation with the whip.** Take comfort, Patsey. The good Lord will manage Epps. In His own time, the good Lord will manage them all. The curse of the pharaohs were a poor example of what wait for the plantation class.*

Patsey who experienced double oppression for surely did not even want to be the object of Epps's sexuality but however the only way for her to keep surviving just nodded head and walked to where her dark fate. White used to think that slave women were the sexual enjoyment for them.

4. Culture Imperialism

There was a culture in White American that in a certain night they were dancing as if they were actors and showed that they were kings or queens. Sadly,

this was applied in slavery; slave master forcibly woke them up to dance and they'll be the object of enjoyment. However this culture grabbed their rights beside to keep their own culture and to have rights for taking rest after a days working in plantation.

Epps : **Get up! We dance tonight! Get up!**
Get your fiddle, Platt. Get up!
Come on! Get get get!
Come on Platt, Come on!

The whole of it certainly more torture than pleasure. Epps kept holding the whip in hand. The slaves were forced to enjoy the night if they did not do Epps would forcibly whip them hundred lashes.

5. Violence

Violence is the action of hurting or damaging someone or things. Actually every day slaves experienced violence from the master either they were disobeyed white's rule or were beaten for any blank reason. The day of the slave was full of violence. The climax the most violated was Patsey were going to Shaw's house and she neaten for many lashes.

Patsey : *If you kill me, I'll stick to that.*
Epps : **I'll fetch you down.** *I'll learn you to go to Shaw's.*
Epps : *Treach. Run and fetch some line.*
Strip her. Strike her bare and lash her to the post.
Mistress Epps : **He pantomimes. There's barely a welt on her.** *That's what your niggers make of you a fool for the taking.*
Epps : **strike her, Platt.**
Strike her.

This dialogue showed how bad the niggers treated by White American, they relentlessly whipped, stroke, beaten even killed the slave if they wanted. Actually, slaves' life was fully tortured violence by the White American, even in every steps they took their life were humiliated directly.

Epps : *you will strike her. You will strike her until her flesh is rent and meat and blood flow equal or I will kill every nigger in my sight.* *You understand me? Strike her. Strike her. (Appendix 2, P. 112)*

Resistances shown by Black American.

1. Revolts

Revolt means an attempt to put an end to the authority of a person or body to rebelling. Tough Blacks were controlled by certain rules; somehow they were

also human who felt the pain like the other human. There was a time when they were not able anymore to experience those cruel actions toward them.

Tibeats : *Are you calling me a liar, boy?*
Salomon : ***It's all a matter of perspective, Sir. From where you stand, you may see differently, but the hands are not mistaken. I simply ask that you use all your sense before rendering judgment.***

Black or slaves did not resist only by defending their words but also by action, somehow violence was the ordinary way to keep waking up on their hard life. When it was not enough to fight through words, slave usually fought physically.

Tibeats : *And s you did? God damn you! I thought you knowed something.*
Salomon : ***I did as instructed. If there is something wrong, it's wrong with the instruction!***
Tibeats : *You black bastard. Strip your clothes!*
Salomon : *I will not.*

2. Radicalism

Radicalism related to or affecting the fundamental nature of something. Being kidnapped and sold into the slavery made Salomon tried to expose her status through some cases.

Salomon : ***We need a sympathetic ear. If we have an opportunity to explain our situation.***
Clemens : *Who in your estimation is that sympathetic?*

The conversation above when Salomon persuaded the other niggers to fight on them for getting free from slavery. This included to radicalism since he was brave to encourage the other for fighting back though there was no responds.

Salomon : *Days ago, I was with my family in my home. Now you tell me all is lost. **"Tell no one who I really am" If want to survive, I don't want to survive, I want to live.***

3. Asking for help

Salomon had done some resistances to get him free but he failed. He tried to ask for help to Armsby but unfortunately he broke their promises.

Salomon : ***I only ask that you deposit a letter at the post office in Marksville and that you keep the action an inviolable secret forever. A patron is what I require, Sir.***

But he did not give up. After some seasons there was a carpenter Bass from Canada who worked in Epps' house, he was kindhearted. Salomon finally told his status why he could be a slave from a freeman.

Salomon : If you truly do then I ask, I beg that you write my friend in the north acquainting them of my situation and beseeching them to forward free papers? It would be unspeakable happiness to see my wife and my family.

4. Religion or Spirituality

This was indirect resistance shown by Salomon. Firstly he was almost giving up but finally he realized only Lord could change everything.

*'Cause my Bible says so too
I said roll, Jordan, roll
Roll, Jordan, roll
My soul will rise in heaven, Lord
For the Year when Jordan roll
Hallelujah
Roll, Jordan, roll
My soul will rise in heaven, Lord
For the year when Jordan roll.*

That is why until nowadays there is Negro Spiritual in choir or music development which inspired of the struggle those Black in slavery that waited their freedom. How they sang, how they expressed their lonesome, their harsh situation became one in the piece of songs of Negro Spiritual.

For African-American slaves, religion offered a measure of solace and hope. Typically denominations like Baptist and Methodist that prevailed among white southerners. After the American Civil War brought an end to slavery, black churches and denominational organization grew in membership, influence and organizational strength, factors that would prove vital to the success of the civil right movements.

Conclusions

Based on the result of the data analysis, it could be concluded that all types of oppressions occurred in 12 Years a Slave movie, those are exploitation, marginalization, powerlessness, culture imperialism and violence. The slaves also fought for resisting. There were four resistances were shown toward the oppressions. They are revolt, radicalism, asking for help and religion or spirituality. Racism which guided into slavery had big impact either for the slaves or white Americans. Slavery could happen to everybody who was still racist since it did not recognize anything. Racism also brought to the destruction of harmonization in society since it created some sides were being superior and the other ones being inferior. However if someone really wanted to keep the justice, it would be. Salomon as well. Though he waited until 12 years but he finally got his freedom and conquered all the miserable's.

Suggestions

Referring to the conclusion above, there are several suggestions offered. Racism which happened because of skin color could not be a measure to decide someone's trait. People should not judge someone because of skin color or race. Those who ever experienced being discriminated of race should not let their mind being ruined by those racist, they should be brave to open up mind, keep their head up against those oppressions. Moreover racism issue was quite important to learn since it would enlarge mind in the case of differences thus the next researchers are suggested to make more depth analysis about racism. Especially for Indonesia as multicultural country really needs to learn much about how to live peacefully in diversities since no matter who they are, what their blood types are, the most important one we human are same as God's creation. The last, differences are Power.

REFERENCES

- An Introduction to Qualitative Research Fourth Edition Sage. 2009. Great Britain: Ashford Colour Press Ltd., Gosports, Hants.
- Barker, R.L. (2003). *The social work dictionary* (5th ed.). Washington, DC: NASW Press.
- Bowling, Ben and Philips Coretta. 2002. *Racism, Crime and Justice*. London. Pearson Education Limited.
- Dinnerstein, Leonard., Nichols, Roger L. & Reimers, David. M. 1990. *Natives and Strangers Blacks, Indian, and Immigrants in America Second Edition*. New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Leiris, Michael. 1963. *Race and Culture*. Paris: UNESCO Paris.
- Mahfouz, Safi Mahmoud. 2013. America's Melting Pot or the Salad Bowl: The Stage Immigrant's Dilemma. *Journal of Foreign Languages, Cultures & Civilizations*, Vol. 1 No. 2, December.
- Marpaung, Rama, R. 2009. *An Analysis of Racial Issues in some Langston Hughes's Poems*. Medan: University of North Sumatra.
- Racism. 2004. America: Greenhaven Press.

- Tanritanir, Bulent Cercis., Aydemir, Yasemin. The suffers of Black women in Alice Walker's Novels the Color Purple and Meridian and Toni Morrison's Novels Beloved and The Bluest Eye. *The Journal of International Social Research*, Vol. 5 Issue: 23.
- Tindaon, Selviana. 2009. *An Analysis of Effects Race Discriminations in America Reflected on Harper Lee's Novel to Kill a Mocking Bird*. Medan: University of North Sumatra.
- U.S Department of State. 2008. *Free at Last The U.S. Civil Rights Movement*. America: Bureau of International Information Programs.
- Young, Iris Marion. 1990. *Justice and the Politics of Difference*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press.
- Yuni, Yosie Indah. 2008. *The Analysis of Racial Discrimination in Richard Wright's Native Son*. Medan: University of North Sumatra.
- Zilversmit, Arthur. 1967. *The first emancipation: the Abolition of Slavery in The North*. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Pres.