



**PREJUDICE AND DISCRIMINATION REFLECTED IN THE LYRICS OF MICHAEL
JACKSON'S "THEY DON'T CARE ABOUT US"**

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PRONOUNCEMENT

The writer states honestly that this project is compiled by her without taking the result from other research in any other university, in S-1, S-2, and S-3 degrees and also in diploma. In addition, the writer ascertains that she does not take the material from other publications or someone's work except for the references which are mentioned in the bibliography.

Semarang, August 2014

Melati Puspitasari

MOTTO AND DEDICATION

“I can accept failure, everyone fails at something but I can’t accept not trying”

(Michael Jordan)

This thesis is dedicated to my beloved family

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The writer realizes that, this thesis is still far from perfection, She, therefore will be glad to receive any constructive criticisms and recommendations to make this report better.

The writer expects that this final project will be useful to the reader who wishes to learn about the social problems, that is prejudice and discrimination. In addition, the writer would like to remind the reader that we should stop prejudice and discrimination to others since both of them lead to hatred.

Semarang, August 2014

The Writer

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Prejudice and Discrimination Reflected in the Lyric of Michael Jackson's "They Don't Care about Us"

Abstract

In a multicultural country such as the United States of America, the differences of race, religion, and class often cause prejudice and discrimination which are often experienced by the minority group such as the African American. This study is aimed at achieving comprehensive understanding regarding the prejudice and discrimination intended to be delivered to the audience within song lyric of Michael Jackson's "They Don't Care about Us". This study uses sociological approach. The analysis of diction and imagery shows the representation of prejudice and discrimination in the lyrics of the song. The song lyric of "They Don't Care about Us" criticizes people about the prejudice and discrimination in society. It gives a strong message to stop prejudice and discrimination because they lead to hatred and make the situation become worse. In order to live peacefully, people need to respect each other regardless the differences of race, culture, and religion.

Key words: prejudice, discrimination, lyrics

1. Introduction

In daily social life, especially in a multicultural country such as the United States of America, the differences of race, religion, ethnicity, and class cannot be avoided. Various people with different backgrounds have essentially brought about social issues in the society. It is due to the fact that sometimes people do not positively address those kinds of differences, and it leads to prejudice and discrimination.

Prejudice can be defined as a negative attitude held by the member of one group toward the others while discrimination has to do with unfavorable action of a group of people based on the basis of membership in a social group. Both of them are among the worst social problems that still exist up to this moment in every part of the world. Both problems are very serious because they always lead to destruction, not only to certain human being but also to the society.

Many singers and songwriters write about social problems in the lyrics of their songs. One of them is Michael Jackson, an African American singer and songwriter whose songs often

present social and cultural issues in his era. One of his songs that deals with prejudice and discrimination is “They Don’t Care about Us” written by Michael Jackson in 1996. The song tells about the worsening situation that happens due to prejudice and discrimination.

The lyrics of “They Don’t Care about Us” are the object of this study since lyrics are part of a song that can represent the social issues, culture, or lifestyle in a particular area. In “They Don’t Care about Us” lyrics, there are some words and expression that indicate the existence of prejudice and discrimination experienced by the African American in the United States of America.

This paper aims to show the readers the concept of prejudice and discrimination, the factor that cause prejudice and discrimination, and prejudice and discrimination experienced by African American in the United States of America as reflected in the song lyrics “They Don’t Care about Us”. Equally important, the analysis of the issue related to prejudice and discrimination can be used as an example of problems in our daily life, especially in Indonesian society which also comprises of various socio-cultural backgrounds. In reference to this matter, the writer executes a study with the title of “Prejudice and Discrimination Reflected in the Lyric of Michael Jackson’s “They Don’t Care about Us”.

2. Theoretical Framework

The intrinsic elements are the elements that build the literary work itself, such as theme, diction, figure of speech, diction, and imagery. Meanwhile, the extrinsic elements are literary elements which can be found outside the literary works but they are indirectly related or affect the literary works. Examples of extrinsic elements are the background, history, social condition,

and biography of the author. Extrinsic elements include individual subjectivity of the author with his/her attitude, belief, and world views that all affect the work.

In this study, the song lyrics of Michael Jackson's "They Don't Care about Us" are considered as a poem. Therefore the song lyrics are analyzed in their intrinsic elements, i.e. the diction and imagery. The extrinsic elements are prejudice and discrimination. The analysis of diction and imagery leads to the analysis of prejudice and discrimination in "They Don't Care about Us" lyrics.

2.1 Diction and Imagery

Diction is certain words chosen by the authors to express what they want to state. Diction can be divided into two types: denotation and connotation. Denotation is generally known as universal conception of words. According to Perrine, denotation is "the dictionary meaning or literal meanings of the word" (1969:38). Meanwhile, connotation is "what it suggests beyond what it expresses: its overtones of meaning" (1969:38). For example, the denotative meaning of the word "flower" is the reproductive portion of any plant. Meanwhile, in connotative meaning, "flower" can be interpreted as symbol of beauty, social amenities, symbol of woman, and love.

The second intrinsic aspect that will be discussed is imagery. Perrine states: "imagery may be defined as the representation through language of sense experience" (1969:54). Perrine also differentiates imagery into seven types. They are visual imagery which appears from eyesight, olfactory imagery which appears from sense of smell, auditory imagery which appears from sense of hearing, tactile imagery which appears from sense of feeling, gustatory imagery which appears from sense of taste, organic imagery which appears from mind, kinesthetic imagery which appears from movement or gesture (1969: 54). Not all songs employ the seven

types of imagery. Therefore this study will analyze only four types of imageries in Michael Jackson's "They Don't Care about Us". They are visual imagery, kinesthetic imagery, auditory imagery, and organic imagery.

2.2 Prejudice and Discrimination

The analysis of this study is focused on prejudice and discrimination as reflected in Michael Jackson's "They Don't Care about Us". Both prejudice and discrimination are important issues which have to do with social gap which happens because of certain differences.

2.2.1 Prejudice

According to Baron, "prejudice is an attitude (usually negative) toward the members of some groups based solely on their membership in that group" (1974:151). Prejudice obviously exists in every individual and it could happen to every individual. Scafer in his book, *Racial and Ethnic Group* states that people have a natural tendency toward prejudice (2000:112). In line with Scafer, Baron states that people tend to divide and distinguish people into "us" and "them" based on certain categories. In other words, they view other people either as belonging to their group (usually termed in group) or to some other category (an out group) (1974:160).

In evaluating its member, a group usually has some categories based on race, ethnic, religion, sex, and etc. When a person has certain similarity with one group, he may be accepted as the member of that group or to be part of "us". Otherwise, when a person has differences and is not appropriate with categorization of "us", he is considered as other group "them". The members of a certain group which are prejudicing, have a tendency to evaluate and judge other groups based on some characteristics manner such as race, ethnic, religion, etc before receiving information relevant to the particular issue on which a judgment is being made.

There are two basic factors that cause prejudice: ignorance and ethnocentrism (Scafer, 2000: 111-119). The first is the ignorance of the person's real character, and people often form their opinion based on stereotypical line. Scafer states that stereotype is an exaggerated belief or set of belief concerning the characteristics of the member of racial or ethnic group (2000:111). The second cause of prejudice is ethnocentrism, which is the view that one particular ethnic group is somehow superior to all others (2000:119). The members of an in-group have a feeling of pride toward their own group and frequently contempt toward the member of out-group.

Negative prejudice is the issue that multicultural society has to face and this issue might be experienced by any race members in a variety of ways. In some levels, prejudice can be very harmful to society because it can generate discrimination. It means that prejudice can be the reason of discrimination against the other group.

2.2.2 Discrimination

According to Feagin in Kitano, discrimination is an unfavorable action directed toward the member of subordinate group undertaken by the member of dominant group because there are some differences (1985: 54). The dominant group becomes the superior class and holds the minority group with their own ideas and regulation. Basically, similar to prejudice, discrimination could happen to everybody in any part of the world, no matter who they are and where they are. It is in line with what Bowling stated:

Discrimination consists 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).

From the quotation above, it is then obvious that discrimination definitely could happen to anybody in the world.

Discrimination is related to prejudice. According to Daljoeni, discrimination is usually associated with prejudice because prejudices always construct a rationalization of discrimination, while discrimination brings the threat of attitude to justify the prejudice (1991:85). This statement is supported by Allport in Kitano who sees discrimination as the acting out of prejudice (1985: 53). In short, discrimination is basically prejudicial act that leads to unequal treatment to a certain group or person.

The Declaration of Independence of the United States of America states “All men are created equal”. It means everybody in the United States of America should get equal treatment and position, live as a free man, and get their rights as a citizen. However, a number of minority groups in the United States of America still experience unequal treatment. For example, after the abolition of slavery era, the African American people can live as American citizen but they still get unequal treatment in the society. The African Americans or the black race occupies the bottom of the hierarchy while the White race is at the top. The dominant groups become the superior class and hold the minority groups with their own ideas and regulations.

The doctrine of White Supremacy made by the Anglos says that “all members of the white race are superior to or ‘better’ than all members of the nonwhite races” (Scafer, 2000:83). As the superior race, the Anglo created a new kind of understanding and interpretation of human differences that mostly gave bad effects and sufferings towards African American. Anglo Americans cannot accept the existence of African Americans. As consequences, they never treat African Americans as true human beings because of the different types of physical

characteristics. Later on, they began to show the symptoms of discrimination which are intolerance, separation, segregation, and hatred.

3. Methods of the Study

This study employs sociological approaches to analyze the social condition in the lyrics. Wellek and Warren divide the study of literature and society into three parts; the sociology of the writer, the social contents of the work themselves, and the influences of literature on society (1956: 96). Due to the subject matter, the study emphasizes on the social contents of the lyric *They Don't Care about Us* by Michael Jackson. The song lyrics are considered as a portrayal of social problem, namely prejudice and discrimination in the multicultural country, the United States of America.

4. Prejudice and Discrimination Reflected in the Lyric of Michael Jackson's "They Don't Care about Us"

In the United States of America, many people are different in race, religion, ethnicity, etc. In a positive manner, one may embrace the differences of people and be proud at the uniqueness of individuals. However, when one sees the differences in a negative way, it may trigger social problem, such as prejudice and discrimination. The idea of stopping prejudice and discrimination is the main message proposed by Michael Jackson in his work titled "They Don't Care about Us".

Initially, when people classify others into separate categories "us" (in-group) and "them" (out-group), they are engaged in prejudice. Such categories can be seen in the refrain of "They Don't Care about Us" with the use of pronoun "they" and "us".

All I wanna say is that

They don't really care about us

All I wanna say is that

They don't really care about us

In the lyrics, the words “they” and “us” are chosen to show that there are two distinct groups talked about in this song: the White people which refers to the Anglos and the African Americans. It is emphasized in the eighth and eleventh stanza which mention “but if Roosevelt was livin” and “but if Martin Luther was livin”. As we know, Roosevelt is the 32nd president of the United States of America, and he is a white, and Martin Luther King Jr. is an activist who struggles for equality for African Americans and he is an African American himself. Since the author uses the first-person point of view, “they” refers to the Whites whose role is the dominant group and the actor of prejudice and “us” refers to the African Americans whose role is the minority and the victim of prejudice. Later in this song, the word “I” and “me” also refers to the African Americans and the word “you” refers to the Whites.

The White as the dominant group tends to evaluate the other group to be accepted as the member of their in-group with some categories such as race. Since the race of the Anglos is white, people who are not white are categorized by the Whites as the member of out-group. As the results, the member of the out-group has a probability to be prejudiced and discriminated by the member of in-group. In this song, we can see the representation of prejudice and discrimination among the Whites and the African American in the United States of America. It starts from the first stanza below:

skin head, dead head

everybody gone bad

situation, aggravation
everybody allegation
in the suite, on the news
everybody dog food
bang bang, shot dead
everybody's gone mad

This stanza pictures the mess situation due to prejudice and discrimination as a lot of people do the act of violence that brings the situation worse. The worsening situation is represented in the third line of this stanza “situation, aggravation”. Later, the representation of prejudice is written in the word “allegation” which in denotative meaning is a claim of assertion that someone has done something illegal or wrong, typically one made without proof. In the seventh line, through the auditory imagery in the word “bang bang”, which in denotative meaning means a very loud explosion, the audience is invited to imagine how terrifying the situation is where a lot of people do the act of violence, such as firing and bombing.

The next stanza tells how the Whites treat the African Americans as other group. Since the prejudice can be covered by hatred, the African Americans have endured mistreatment from the Whites.

Beat me, hate me
You can never break me
Will me, thrill me
Jew me, sue me
Everybody do me
Kick me, kike me

Don't you black or white me

The stanza describes the unfavorable attitude and action toward the African Americans as it is described in “Beat me, hate me” and “don’t you black or white me”. The words “will me, thrill me” means that as the dominant group, the whites force the African American to obey the rules set by the Whites. Through the visual imagery in the word “black or white me”, the audience is given a visualization about the race or the color of the skin talked in this song, those are black and white. Black refers to African Americans race and white refers to the Anglos race. It means that for the Whites, the race or skin color is an important matter to decide how to treat other group. In this stanza, the unfavorable attitude is represented in the word “hate”, “will”, “thrill”, and “sue” meanwhile the action done by the Whites is written in kinesthetic imagery, for example “beat”, “break”, and “kick”.

The other examples of prejudice can be seen in the stanza below which also used the pronoun “I” and “me” that refer the victim of prejudice and discrimination.

Tel me what has become my life

I have a wife and two children who love me

I am the victim of police brutality, now

I'm tired of bein' the victim of hate

You're rapin' me off my pride

Oh, for God's sake

I look to heaven to fulfill its prophecy

Set me free

In this stanza, “you” refers to the actor of prejudice, the whites and “I” refers to the victim of prejudice, the African Americans. The stanza above implies that the Whites have enforced prejudice toward blacks so that make the blacks cannot enjoy their life righteously. The Whites posse negative attitude toward African Americans without getting to know them personally. It is proved in the second line of this stanza. This line affirms that the African Americans are actually well-behaved people as they have family who love them. It can be seen in word “love” that is organic imagery. Thus, it can be concluded that the African American have been prejudged by the Whites without even knowing them personally.

As the consequences of prejudice that the whites hold against the African Americans, the African Americans become target of blamed. “I am the victim of police brutality” in the second line of this stanza tells that the Whites prejudge that the African Americans posse tendency to do crime. For this reason, the African Americans become the scapegoat, that is, those who are always blamed, and become the victims of hates.

Later, on the next line, it is written “I’m tired of bein’ the victim of hate”. This sentence contains organic imagery in the word “hate” which is the opposite of the word “love”. In the contrast to the African American family’s feeling, the Whites show the expression of hatred to the African American. Due to the hatred, the African Americans become the victim so that they feel like their pride as good people is stolen by the Whites as it is reflected in the “You’re rapin’ me off my pride”. The word “rapin” is a kinesthetic imagery which can also be interpreted as stealing.

In the concept of prejudice, people might do prejudice caused by two factors: the ignorance of person’s real character and ethnocentrism. In this stanza above, we can indicate that

African American bear a negative stereotype as criminals which is written in the seventh line of this stanza.

Skin head, dead head
Everybody gone bad
Trepidation, speculation
Everybody allegation
In the suite, on the news
Everybody dog food
Black male, black mail
Throw your brother in jail

The word “black” in the first phrase is denotative since it refers to the color of skin; the word “black mail” means racketeering or attempt to influence the action of a person by unfair pressure or threats. Besides adjusting the rhyme, the word “black mail” is chosen to emphasize that the black people are stereotyped as criminals.

In addition to stereotype, ethnocentrism can also be the cause of prejudice. Since the ethnocentric person has feeling of pride of their group, they assume that their group is the ideal ones so that it can emerge the feeling of superior. When the ethnocentric person assumes that their group is the superior ones, they have tendency to disparage and even try to obviate the other different group. In the stanza above, the word “skin head” in denotative meaning refers to people who shave their head. *The free dictionary* defines “skin head” as a “member of any various group of people, especially young people, who shave their head and sometimes participate in white-supremacist and anti-immigrant activities” (www.freedictionary.com/skinhead).

In the lyric, the words “skin head” might be interpreted as ethnocentrism as it is paired with the word “dead head” which is interpreted as killing, that is the most serious crime. The ethnocentrism which is possessed by the Whites lies on the more serious level. It means that the whites who have excessive devotion and pride of their group, try to get rid of the African Americans by doing the act of violence, such as genocide or extermination for maintaining their power.

Moreover, in the advanced level, prejudice can lead to discrimination. When the negative attitude toward a member of other group turns into a form of negative action, it can be called discrimination. In this song, there is discrimination toward African American as reflected in this stanza below:

*Tell me what has become of my rights
Am I invisible because you ignore me?
Your proclamation promised me free liberty, now
I'm tired of bein' the victim of shame
They're throwing me in a class with a bad name
I can't believe this is the land from which I came
You know I really do hate to say it
The government don't wanna see
But if Roosevelt was livin'
He wouldn't let this be, no, no*

Discrimination and prejudice are related as prejudice can be the cause of discrimination. When people start to judge other people or group based on prejudices and treat them differently, they are engaging in discrimination. In the stanza above, it can be interpreted that the African

Americans become not only the victim of prejudice but also the victim of discrimination done by the Whites.

The third line of this stanza tells that the United States of America has proclaimed the declaration which promises liberty, but the fact says that the African American cannot get their rights as the citizen as it is written “tell me what had become of my rights”. From the fourth line of this stanza it can be inferred that the African American are the victims of prejudice and discrimination by the Whites. The word “throw” is kinesthetic imagery. In denotative, it means propel with force through the air by the movement of the arm and hand, but in connotative meaning, it can be interpreted as a feeling of dislike. In this case, the African American is relegated by the Whites to a low status and constantly portrayed in a bad image.

Moreover, in the eighth line, government that should protect and guarantee the rights of citizens also does the discrimination. They, who must have big power to control over people, do not care about the problem and the suffering of the oppressed group, in this case the African American. This stanza also expresses the hope of the oppressed group that long for a figure like Roosevelt who struggles to help people get better quality in life and get their rights as normal citizens in the United States.

The following stanza gives another example of discrimination.

Skin head, dead head

Everybody gone bad

Situation, speculation

Everybody litigation

Beat me, bash me

You can never trash me

Hit me, kick me

You can never get me

There are some words that employ kinesthetic imagery to clarify that there are physical movements or actions, for example the words “beat”, “bash”, “trash”, “hit”, and “kick”. These words represent violent actions directed to the victims of prejudice and discrimination.

The whites ignore the suffering of African American due to discrimination as can be seen in the stanza below.

Some things in life they just don't wanna see

But if martin luther was livin

He wouldn't let this be, no, no

They hope that Martin Luther King Jr., who uphold the equality and fights against discrimination was still living. If he were still living, he might be able to prevent prejudice and discrimination.

This stanza below also tells how the Anglos treat the other group.

Skin head, dead head

Everybody gone bad

Situation, segregation

Everybody allegation

In the suite, on the news

Everybody dog food

Kick me, kike me

Don't you wrong or right me

In this stanza, the word “situation” is paired with the word “segregation”. Segregation is another manifestation of discrimination which can be defined as the separation of an individual from larger group. By the application of segregation, it can be assumed that the prejudice and discrimination done by the whites is at more serious level. However, the lyric of “They Don’t Care about Us” also show resistance from the words “you can never get me”; “don’t you black or white me”; and “don’t you wrong or right me”.

4 Conclusion

“They Don’t Care about Us” is a song written by Michael Jackson which tells about an African American who face an environment that is loaded with some social issues such as prejudice and discrimination. These social issues are caused by two factors that is stereotype and ethnocentrism which can be inferred from the analysis of intrinsic and extrinsic aspect of the song.

Through analysis of the intrinsic and extrinsic aspect, the reader can see the prejudice and discrimination is experienced by the character “I” and “Us” which represent the minority group in the United States of America, the African American. The analysis shows that prejudice is still occurring towards them since the Whites still judge and have negative feeling toward the African Americans from different race without trying to know their personal character. The reader also may understand that the discrimination as the action of prejudice has disadvantage towards the African Americans that is they cannot enjoy their life righteously. Although the African Americans are oppressed by the Whites, they show the resistance that they are not afraid of prejudice and discrimination.

The reader may understand the intention of Michael in making “They Don’t Care about Us” lyrics that is to give us a strong message that to have a better life we have to respect each other without judging and questioning either the color of skin, religion, race, or ethnicity. This song tries to make people realize that prejudice and discrimination bring people into hatred. It is proved that discrimination gives high contribution in making social problems to the society.

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