

Black Children's Resistance Against Discrimination in Renee Watson's *Piecing Me Together* (2017)

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ABSTRACT

The practice of racial discrimination in America is still taking place today. Until now, Black still has to fight for justice in America. The awful fact is that the scourge of racism is so deeply entrenched in society; and it is not only experienced by adult black men and women, but also by black children. In challenging the racial inequality, a number of writers, especially African-American writers are addressing the issue in their works, including in children's literature. The award-winning *Piecing Me Together* (2017) by Renee Watson, which received the Coretta Scott King award, is one of the children's literatures that expose racial discriminations experienced by black children. Jade, black girl, had difficulty adapting to her school environment that puts her as a minority in terms of race and economic. She is also discriminated because of her gender in both black and white environments. This study will endeavour to portray the intersectional discriminations experienced by a black girl and the strategies to fight the condition by becoming financially independent and adept in management skills. In its analysis, the study will use the theory of intersectionality by Kimberlé Crenshaw to dismantle the form of discriminations and the agency concept by Davidson to show the resistance towards the condition.

Keywords: Black, Children's Literature, Discrimination, Inequality, Intersectionality

1. INTRODUCTION

Racial discrimination remains an issue that has yet to be resolved in society, especially in the United States. According to Ponterotto [1], it is the behaviour where one race is denying access to a particular racial group while providing privileges to another. As such, there are differences in the treatment of a certain race and bias regarding the opportunity and power that a particular race possesses. One of the racial groups in the US facing this predicament is the African-Americans. As a result, this group faces discrimination in the American socio-cultural environment.

Racism toward the African-Americans has been occurring for centuries. From the end of the 16th century to the 18th century, African-Americans were traded as slaves by the white people. The history of slavery becomes one of the main factors that form the basis of belief of the white groups that black groups do not deserve to have the same position as them. Consequently, the American society creates boundaries in relationship between the white race and the black race. The White race believes that they possess more power and imbue with a sense of superiority. The dominant white groups were certain that they were superior compared to all other racial groups. Conversely, the black race considers inferior. As such, the African-American (Black) group still, to this day, has to confront barriers in achieving equality in various socio-economic sectors such as education and employment opportunities.

The inequality of rights and biased treatment by the dominant group toward the African-American group can be found in the American society. Unfortunately, this condition is faced by not only adult black men and women, but also by black children. From birth, skin colour determines one's social position in the American society. Therefore, black children often receive different treatment. They also struggle to combat the negative stereotypes attached to their racial group.

However, African-Americans do not remain silent when confronted with discriminatory treatments. They take action by organizing social movements to achieve equality, and one of such movements that still going on is the Black Lives Matter movement. This movement demands equal rights and opportunities for black people. Furthermore, to challenge the system of racism and discrimination in the United States, a number of black authors raise the issue of discrimination experienced by African-Americans in literature. One literary genre that raises the issue of discrimination is children's literature.

Children's literature is a description of life told from the perspective of a child that involves emotions and feelings, and it is expressed in a language that can be reached and understood by child readers [2]. In other words, children's literature is a literary work with specific characteristics about the world of children and is read by children. Socio-cultural issues are packaged in language that can be comprehended by children. Children's literature can be interpreted as a medium that

provides major contributions towards the maturity process. The existence of children's literature may provide, in a light manner, an insight to the children about identity and phenomena that occur in a complex socio-cultural environment.

Children's literatures in the US seldom depict black children. Most of the published works feature white characters. Although some children's books do featured black children characters, the content and identification of the black race is often inaccurate. This condition made black writers more aware and led to the movements from various black communities to put out written works that represent black children. They believe that black children must have their own distinct reading materials so they may learn about themselves through a proper depiction of the black race. This is also seen as a token of appreciation and pride by the black authors for their culture. According to Bishop [3], children need books as a window to see the realities of life; they require books with multicultural themes to see racial differences that exist from an early age. The lack of representation of black children in children's literature is believed will make black children lose their knowledge and love for their own culture. Thus, black writers and illustrators emerged and began writing about the African-American ethnic race by presenting the black children characters in their works. Despite the emergence of black writers, African-American children's literature up to the 21st century has yet to secure a respectable position. African-American children's literature still lags behind other works that feature white characters and culture. According to data from the Children's Book Centre (CCBC), in 2013, there were 1,183 children's books published. However, from that number, only 124 books had children of colour as the main character. African-American children's literature still has a long way to go before it can establish its place the American society.

One black writer who continues to portray black characters and culture in her works is Renee Watson. Renee Watson is a writer and activist. She has published 13 works in the children's literature genre. All of her works feature black characters. One of Watson's motivations is to use art to help young people deal with the trauma and discuss social realities and problems. She has published *This Side of Home* (2015), *Piecing Me Together* (2017), and *Watch Us Rise* (2019) in the novel category. The three novels raised the issue of racism experienced by black children in America.

One of Watson's novels, *Piecing Me Together* [4], depicts the issue of discrimination and inequality in the American society that was experienced by a black girl named Jade. This novel has received several awards, such as the Corretta Scott King Author Award and the Newberry Honour in 2018, and it has been named A School Library Journal Best Book of 2017 and Chicago Public Library's Best Book of 2017.

The book tells the story of the life of a black girl named Jade. The child character in this work is exposed

to multiple discriminations. The discrimination she experienced was based on her race, gender, and social status. Jade had difficulty adjusting to her school environment where she is a racial and economic minority. She did not receive the same opportunities as the other white students. Then, Jade also faced gender discrimination in both black and white circles. To exacerbate the situation even further, the standardisation of beauty, skin colour, body shape, and objectification often make her the target of ridicule and labelling by white and black men alike.

The research on discrimination experienced by black children is discussed by Choi [5] who describes the impact of the era of slavery on the lives of African-Americans in modern times. The trauma from the discrimination they experienced has an impact on family instability and lives that have always been haunted by feelings of intimidation by white groups. AlHafizh [6] uses Gramsci's theory of hegemony to dismantle the dominance of the white race to show the discrimination experienced by black people. Mielke [7] illustrates the life of African-American children in 1930s as portrayed in children's books. Using structuralism and post-colonialism theory, Mielke demonstrates that the lives of African-American children are constructed by institutions and the society. Singer [8] uses the sociology theory of Wendy Griswold to analyse gender inequality in three novels that feature black children.

The issue of multiple discriminations as experienced by Jade and the strategy of fighting against the injustice have not become the focus of literary research on black children's books. As such, this research will examine how the novel *Piecing Me Together* questions the issue of multiple discriminations that black girls from the lower classes have to experience in Africa and what kind of resistance this novel considers as successful. The concept of intersectionality by Kimberlé Crenshaw was used to expose the intersectional discrimination, and the concept of agency by Davidson was used to show the model of resistance adopted by this children's novel.

2. INTERSECTIONAL DISCRIMINATION

The discussion of intersectional discrimination was carried out by analysing the black child character named Jade. The analysis is an interpretation of the story about multiple discriminations based on race, social class, and gender experienced by Jade. Furthermore, the grouping of discriminatory acts experienced by Jade, the black girl in the text, is interrelated; therefore, it forms an intersectional discrimination. The discriminatory acts in the story were not only carried out by the white race, but also by black men. In other words, the black female character in the novel faces triple marginalisation in the white environment and the black environment.

2.1. Racial Discrimination

Skin colour and physical characteristics of a person determine the social status and position of individuals in the American society. Racial inequality is deeply ingrained in the American society. The black race must face discriminatory acts committed by the white race. Despite the fact that the discriminatory acts experienced by black groups have changed over time, to date, they still have to put up with verbal discrimination.

Black groups receive many forms of verbal discrimination. The white race created racial insults by forming negative stereotypes and even labelling black people. This can be observed in the following quote.

She says, "We don't allow loitering in our store." "Loitering? I'm just—I'm waiting for my friend. "You are more than welcome to wait out there," she says, pointing to the bench sitting outside the entrance." So, I can't look around?" "Well, of course, you can. But you can't stand idle and—" [4].

The quote above is a form of racial discrimination experienced by Jade, which occurred in a public space. This conversation occurred between a shopkeeper in a clothing shop and Jade at a shopping centre. The situation depicted in the quote occurred while Jade is looking at clothes and walking inside the shop. The quote represents the shopkeeper's suspicious attitude towards Jade. The sentence "You are more than welcome to wait out there," shows the shopkeeper's dislike of Jade's presence in the shop. The actions of the shopkeeper could be interpreted as perpetuating the stereotypes of black people. The inherent concept of black people that is overshadowed by images of crime gives rise to feelings of suspicion and prejudice against the race. As a result, the black race cannot be free to do anything in the public space.

Discriminatory acts in the racial category are also found in educational institutions. Jade is a black student on a scholarship at St. Francis, an elite school in Portland. St. Francis has predominantly white students. Although Jade is portrayed as someone who has the opportunity to pursue education in the same school as white students, she was treated differently from the other students. This can be seen in this following quotation.

Hannah is behind me. She laughs. "What is your problem today, Weber? PMS? Didn't get laid last night? I mean, God, what is it?" I laugh, and as I put my grilled chicken in the bowl, Ms. Weber says, "Okay, that's it. Go see Mrs. Parker." I don't think she's talking to me, so I keep moving down the line. Sam is finished making her lunch and has gone to find us a seat. "Did you hear me, young lady? Go see Mrs. Parker. Now." "My name is Jade, and why do I have to go see Mrs. Parker?" "Because she's the only one in this school who can handle you. Come with me," she says... I get up and walk toward them. "Did you tell her what you said? Did you tell her that Hannah was being disrespectful too?" [4]

The quote above shows the difference in the treatment by one of the teachers towards the white students and black students. Hannah, a white student, was

disrespectful towards Mrs. Weber (a white teacher) in the cafeteria at lunch. She mocked her teacher with an impolite utterance that appeared in the following remark "What is your problem today, Weber? PMS? Didn't get laid last night? I mean, God, what is it?" Unfortunately, when the incident took place, Jade laughed along with the other students while taking her food at the cafeteria. Ironically, Mrs. Weber only called and punished Jade even though Hannah and the other students scoffed and laughed at her.

The situation described in the quote above can be interpreted as discrimination. Racism has widely infected the socio-cultural environment and no black racial group can be free from its impact [9]. The injustice committed by Ms. Weber is a form of racial discrimination because it can be seen that Hannah, a white student, did not get punished even though she was the one who uttered the rude remark. As a result, Jade was not given the opportunity to defend herself.

2.2. Social Class Discrimination

Social class is closely related to social stratification, which divides the society into a hierarchy; lower class, middle class, and upper class. According to Weber [10], class division in society is determined by economic status. In other words, a person will have a high position and class if she/he has high economic status. As a result of this class structure, lower class groups often face discriminatory action. Discriminatory acts committed against the lower groups include insults, ridicule, and being underestimated.

The novel mentions three parts of Portland, namely North Portland, Northeast Portland, and Portland. Each of these neighbourhoods reflects the economic situation of its populations. This can be seen from Jade's comment as follows.

"Living here means they remind you how by the eighties a lot of those apartments were run-down and how really, they were just the projects with a different name." [4]

"The bus moves and stops, moves and stops, making its way through North Portland. We pass the transition blocks, where North Portland becomes Northeast. Within just a block or two, you stop seeing modest apartment complexes and start seeing houses and luxury apartment buildings, restaurants with outdoor patios, and shops of all kinds." [4]

The quote above illustrates the differences between the neighbourhoods. This distinction can be interpreted as a description of class and economic differences in the text. In the first quote, the neighbourhood where Jade lives is described as shabby and run down. The word 'run-down' emphasizes the fact that the area is only inhabited by people from middle to lower economic class. North Portland, where Jade lives, is also described as being extremely far from the hustle and bustle of the city which is described in the remark "leave by six thirty so I can get to the bus," [4]. To get to school, Jade must use public transportation as early as possible to avoid being late.

The second quote describes the three neighbourhoods. There are North Portland, Northeast Portland, and Portland. The three neighbourhoods above shows the difference of social and economic status of the society. Northeast Portland is described by the phrase 'modest apartment complexes' which mean simple residential area. This simple living area means that the people living in the neighbourhood are middle class. Next, Portland, in the sentence within just a block or two you stop seeing modest apartment complexes and start seeing houses and luxury apartment buildings, restaurant with outdoor patios, and shop of all kinds. shows the economic in this area is higher than the two neighbourhoods because its show the luxurious part of the city. In this fashion, the novel typifies the life and social class of a black girl who is in the lowest position.

The social class discrimination experienced by Jade is reflected in her school lessons. Her mother's job as a housekeeper made other students in her class fling insults unconsciously. This can be seen in the conversation between the teacher and students in the class as follows.

My humanities teacher asked, "Who are the invisible people in our community?" Some girl in my class said her housekeeper. It wasn't that I didn't think she took her housekeeper for granted; it was that I couldn't believe she had one. And then so many of my classmates nodded, like they could all relate. And I realized how different I am from everyone else at St. Francis. Not only because I'm black and almost everyone else is white, but because their mothers are the kind of people who hire housekeepers, and my mother is the kind of person who works as one. [4]

The quote above shows how the upper class students discriminating against those from the lower social class. In an elite school environment that promises her the opportunity to get out of her social situation, she had to experience double marginality, first, racially marginalised since black students are the minority in that elite school. Then, she was also socially marginalised because those who attend that school were children of the upper middle class. One of the markers of social class differences is shown through the responses of Jade's friends to the teacher's questions about the people who are considered invisible or not generally taken into account. The answer of her classmates, including those who had black skin, was that the housekeeper group was considered invisible. This answer immediately marginalises Jade and puts her into a position outside the circle. This is because Jade's mother, a housekeeper, belongs to the group her friends were referring to. Therefore, Jade's friends, without realizing it, have indirectly created boundaries between themselves who are from the upper social class and Jade. On the other hand, the answers of her friends positioned her as part of the invisible group, a group that does not count. This affects the way Jade sees herself and her surroundings. She positioned herself in a marginalised position and limited her interactions because she was worried that the children from different social class would marginalise her.

2.3. Gender Discrimination

Black women often suffer from multiple discriminations because of their gender. Unlike men, they suffer from several categories of oppression, namely race and gender. According to Claudia Jones [11], black women experience triple oppression based on their race and ethnicity, gender, and social class. Black women are treated as sexual objects. The fact that women are considered social objects signifies that women are treated as objects or commodities. Needless to say, such treatment is occurring regardless of the personality and dignity of the woman herself. The objectification in this text can be observed from the following passage.

They go on with their what about, naming girls who are nowhere in sight, but then they start pointing at women who are in the restaurant ... I hear one of them say, "What about her?" I know he is pointing to me, which means they are all looking at me — from behind. Not good. The man at the counter calls my number and gives me my food. The boys behind me assess me. One of them says, "I give her a five." The other: "A five? Man, she is so big, she breaks the scale." [4]

The act of objectification against Jade was done by black men in her environment. Jade was used as an object to satisfy the lust of the men by giving her scores. In giving the scores, black men clearly see the curves of the female body. As such, Jade is valued as an object or commodity. The sentence "I give her a five." And the other comment: "A five? Man, she is so big, she breaks the scale", suggest that women are seen as goods that are valued based on their physical appearance. Discrimination is shown through the 'scoring' or establishing standards of women. The arbitrary scores given by men is a form of men showing their superiority to women.

2.4. Intersectionality

Intersectionality is a system of discrimination that overlaps multiple categories. Intersectionality interpretation is a dynamic method for analysing the disproportion of power and inequality of any kind [12]. In other words, this method exposes the multiple discrimination experienced by someone such as discrimination based on race, gender, sexual orientation, social class, etc.

Renee Watson's *Piecing Me Together* [4] shows the intersectional discrimination experienced by a black girl named Jade. In her daily life, she experiences discrimination because of her race, gender, and social class. These three categories overlap each other, making Jade experience multiple discrimination in the American society. The complexity depicted in the text is a problem that many black girls have to face in real life in America.

3. RESISTANCE AGAINST INTERSECTIONAL DISCRIMINATION

Acts of discrimination in Renee Watson's novel *Piecing Me Together* [4] show the inequality in the contemporary American society. Not remaining silent in such conditions, the black female character fought back against the injustice. The first strategy she used was by becoming economically independent. This can be seen in Jade's remark as follows.

I bought clothes with the money I made from working as a tutor at the rec centre over the summer. [4]

The above quote shows the ability of a black child to teach. Jade is known as someone who is very intelligent, so much, so that she can get a scholarship in an elite school that can only be accessed by white groups or those with high economic status. She did not waste her intelligence and made it with her own strength. This shows that the black child character possesses the necessary ability and able to turn this into an opportunity so she can become someone with a high position in the contemporary American society. With the abilities and knowledge that she has, she gained recognition from the people she taught. In addition, by teaching, Jade is improving her financial situation.

Apart from being economically independent, Jade's actions as a foreign language teacher can indicate that she is recognised by others. One of the factors that determine if a person is considered as an agent is the recognition of other people toward that person [13]. The recognition in this case is the acceptance that Jade is someone who is skilled in a foreign language (Spanish) and can teach others. Her abilities can improve her position in the society.

Moreover, resistance against intersectional discrimination is also depicted from the subjectivity shown by Jade as a black child. This can be observed from the following quote:

I hesitate. My problem seems trivial now after remembering Natasha Ramsey. There are worse things happening in this world. But if I don't say it now, I never will. "I just wanted to ask a question," I say. "I—I wanted to know why you didn't think to nominate me for the study abroad program." I look away, down at the floor, before I get a glimpse of his reaction. "Well, Jade, that's a good question." I give him my reasons why I think I deserve to go. "I have an A in your class. You always pick me to help people in the class who are struggling. And, you know, this is an opportunity to do volunteer work and service and that would look really good on my college résumé; plus, without the study abroad program, I doubt I'll ever, ever get an opportunity to travel internationally." Maybe I shouldn't have said that last point, but it's true. And he needs to know. Mr. Flores's face changes colour like a mood ring. [4]

The above quote shows a situation when Jade fought the discriminatory treatment from her Spanish teacher. This quote explicitly shows that Jade is a student with the most potential to go to another country to represent her school. However, Jade was never selected as a

representative from her school because of her race, ethnic and economic background. To challenge the injustice, she was finally able to express the opinion that she had been hiding. Her opinion can be interpreted as the fact that Jade can become an agent to herself. Agents, according to Davidson, are individuals who cannot be restrained or pressured by others. As a result, Jade was able to voice her own opinion and find justice.

4. CONCLUSION

Renee Watson's *Piecing Me Together* [4] illustrates the discriminations faced by the black child character named Jade. She is discriminated against for her race, gender and social class. Furthermore, the novel also shows that Jade experienced multiple discriminations and triple oppressions in the contemporary American society. The character in this novel shows how she fights back against the racial injustice.

Therefore, Jade is a representation of a black female child who fights back against the system of racism in the United States. She fights independently and improves her financial condition. Black people often receive relatively small employment opportunities; moreover, they mostly get jobs associated with physical strength. However, in this novel, the black child character is depicted as a teacher. This breaks the deep-seated stereotype that has developed in the American society that black people are not suitable for jobs that require intelligence. In addition, the child character shows her subjectivity by speaking out and being acknowledged by others.

AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS

All authors contributed to the study conception and design. Material preparation, data collection and analysis were performed by Wanda Rifani Astuti Nst and Dhita Hapsarani. The first draft was written by Wanda Rifani Astuti Nst. Review, supervision, and editing were performed by Dhita Hapsarani. Authors read and approved the final manuscript.

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