

# THE PORTRAYAL OF RACIAL DISCRIMINATION IN BRYAN STEVENSON'S *JUST MERCY*

Ninis Mayditha Anggraini

Universitas 17 Agustus 1945, Indonesia

[ninismaydithaangg@gmail.com](mailto:ninismaydithaangg@gmail.com)

Corresponding Author: Ninis Mayditha Anggraini

## ABSTRACT

This study entitled "THE PORTRAYAL OF RACIAL DISCRIMINATION IN *JUST MERCY* BY BRYAN STEVENSON" is a study that focuses on the racial discrimination experience by black people living in America which is describes through the narratives and dialogues in this novel. There are two questions that will be answered in this research, namely the forms of discrimination that appeared in the novel and the racial discrimination portrayed in the novel. The purpose of this study is to analyze the forms of discrimination that appear in the novel with the statement by Ben Bowling and Correta Philips (2002) and also how racial discrimination is explained in the novel. This study uses the theory of Swingewood (1972) with a sociological approach in analyzing the research question. This study uses a qualitative descriptive method in analyzing the narration and dialogue used for this research. The writer finds two forms of discrimination that appear in the novel, namely direct and indirect discrimination. In addition, the writer also finds that the author of the novel describes racial discrimination in the forms of stereotypes, prejudice, and racial profiling aimed at victims of racism in this novel.

**Keywords:** : *prejudice, racial discrimination, racial profiling, stereotype*

**Submitted:**

XX May 20xx

**Accepted:**

XX June 20xx

**Published:**

XX July 20xx

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Literary work is a way to expand the author's idea of dynamic activity in human life. Literary works are human creations that are reflected in real life (Lukens, 2003:2 ). Literary work is a creative expression to express someone's ideas feelings from what is experienced, where the creative expression will always develop according to the times. In addition , literature is a form of reflection of someone's attitude towards the behaviors that arise from the surrounding natural environment as outlined in the form of art. In line with the above statement, literary works cannot be separated from observations, experiences, and lessons regarding the problems of human life or other living things in the real world, which are then manifested by the author in a fictional world. Many problems usually emerge in human life that it becomes interesting to be represented by literary works. One of them is what is known as discrimination.

Discrimination is the behavior of refusing, distinguishing, or limiting treatment directed to a person or group based on distinctive attributes such as race, skin color, physical body shape, gender, ethnicity, religion, or social class to reduce or eliminate the person or group in obtaining resources . An individual who gets discriminated against by others will become depressed because they feel alienated by the people around them. Groups that are discriminated against by other groups will feel unfair treatment in any case, which of course triggers hostility between groups. Discrimination is divided into two forms,

namely direct discrimination and indirect discrimination. In literature, many works contain discrimination. Many writers of literary works take the theme of discrimination because discrimination still occurs from year to year and also becomes an interesting topic for reading and education by the public. The term discrimination is usually intended to describe an act of the dominant majority against a weak minority so that it can be said that their behavior is immoral and undemocratic. One type of discrimination that is often used as a theme by writers of literary works is racial discrimination. Racial discrimination is an act or behavior that is badly aimed at a group of people by distinguishing them based on their skin color and race.

One of the authors who present the issue of racial discrimination is Bryan Stevenson, in his novel *Just Mercy* (2014). *Just Mercy* is Bryan Stevenson's story of his decades-long career as a legal advocate for marginalized people who have been wrongfully convicted or severely punished. . Although the novel contains profiles of many different people, the main storyline is the relationship between Stevenson, the organization he founded (the Equal Justice Initiative, or EJI), and Walter McMillian, a black man accused of murder and sentenced to death in Alabama in the late 1980s. Through this novel, the writer wants to find out what are the forms of direct and indirect discrimination that appeared in the *Just Mercy* by Bryan Stevenson and find out how are racial discrimination portrayed in *Just Mercy* by Bryan Stevenson.

## 2. METHOD

The research design used in this research is qualitative. Meanwhile, the type of research is descriptive. According to Cresswell ( 2018 ) qualitative methods demonstrate a different approach to scholarly inquiry than methods of quantitative research. Although the processes are similar, qualitative methods rely on text and image data, have unique steps in data analysis, and draw on diverse designs. Meanwhile, Bungin (2007: 68) explains that the type of descriptive research is a research that aims to describe, summarize various conditions, various situations, or various phenomena of social reality that exist in the community that is the object of research, and seeks to draw that reality to the surface. as a feature, character, sign, or description of certain conditions or phenomena. Meanwhile, this research was conducted to explain how the 's efforts to describe the racial discrimination portrayed in the novel and how many types of racial discrimination acts appeared in the novel *Just Mercy* by Bryan Stevenson. This research is qualitative research based on the fact that the object of this research is a novel. and the data from this research are in the form of words and this research is also presented descriptively.

There are two data collection techniques used in this study, namely reading techniques and note-taking techniques. The first step is reading the book repeatedly to understand the content of the book. And the second step is taking notes of important information in the source of data. The writer identifies the data by highlighting the narration and dialogues in the book that are related to the objective of the study. For the first data, the writer highlighting the narration and dialogues that related to the direct and indirect discrimination that appeared in the book. In the second data, the writer highlights the narration and dialogues that related to the stereotype, prejudice, and racial profiling that related to the research question. After the data are identified, the writer manages the data into parts based on their classification. The purpose is to make the process of analyzing data easier.

## 3. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Based on the objective of the study, this chapter is divided into two parts. In the first part, the writer will describe the forms of direct and indirect discrimination that appeared in *Just Mercy* by Bryan Stevenson based on the quotations and the second part will describe the portrayal of racial

discrimination such as stereotypes, prejudice, and racial profiling in *Just Mercy* by Bryan Stevenson based on narration and dialogues that related to the research question.

### **3.1 The Forms of Direct and Indirect Discrimination That Appeared in *Just Mercy* by Bryan Stevenson**

The discrimination is seen clearly in this book. There are two types of discrimination that appear in the book *Just Mercy* by Bryan Stevenson. The types are Direct Discrimination and Indirect Discrimination. From the analysis conducted, direct discrimination treatment is the most frequently mentioned in the book. This is because Stevenson tells how clients who are dominated by black people whose cases have been handled by Stevenson are directly discriminated against by the people around them, especially white people

#### **3.1.1 Direct Discrimination in The Book *Just Mercy* by Bryan Stevenson**

In the book, several characters are told who get direct discrimination treatment. the first is the experience of Bryan Stevenson. It is said in the book, that when Bryan is on his way home from his office driving a car and playing music, he is suddenly stopped by an Atlanta SWAT officer's car. Just as he opened the car door and got out of the car, a policeman who is walking toward him pointed a gun at him, "As soon as I opened my car door and got out, the police officer who had started walking toward my vehicle drew his weapon and pointed it at me. I must have looked completely bewildered." (Stevenson, 2014:37). The officer kept the gun pointed at Bryan and asked him what he is doing on the highway. Stevenson admitted that he only drives his car after work and only listens to music. But the police officer did not believe what Stevenson said. The officer thought that Stevenson is a criminal who is troubling the residents around his residence. Then the officer searched Stevenson's car. The next character told in the book who is directly discriminated against by white people is Michael Donald. Donald is a young man of African American descent who is sentenced to death without lynching. Donald is said to have been walking home from the store one evening, hours after the annulment of the prosecution of a black man accused of shooting a white police officer. Many whites are shocked by the verdict and blamed the cause of the annulment on the African Americans who had been allowed to serve on the jury at the trial. After the annulment incident, a group of angry white men who are members of the Ku Klux Klan went looking for someone to victimize. They find Donald walking alone to his house and decided Donald be the victim.

#### **3.1.2 Indirect Discrimination in The Book *Just Mercy* by Bryan Stevenson**

Indirect discrimination is a form of discrimination that occurs when there is a neutral regulation, but in practice, it discriminates against people who have certain characteristics. In this quote which says, "Educational opportunities for black children in the 1950s were limited, but Walter's mother got him to the dilapidated "colored school" for a couple of years when he was young." (Stevenson, 2014:22). The quote is included in indirect discrimination against black people. As it is said that in 1950 when Walter was young, black people's opportunities to go to school very is limited whereas in that year poverty hit most black families living in America. Walter, who lived in a poor black settlement, could not enjoy adequate school facilities. his mother took him to school a dilapidated "colored school" which means the school is a special school for black people who do not have adequate facilities. And apart from black people who have schools with more adequate facilities

## 3.2 The Portrayal of Racial Discrimination in *Just Mercy* by Bryan Stevenson

Apart from direct and indirect discrimination, this book also finds racial discrimination. Based on the book, there are three forms of racial discrimination, namely stereotypes, prejudice, and also racial profiling. The treatment of racial discrimination is mostly felt by black people who are told in the book. They get racially discriminated treatment that is not only done by the surrounding community, but also by law enforcement officers. The writer will explain some of the racial discrimination treatment experienced by the characters in the book based on quotes taken from the book.

### 3.2.1 *Stereotypes Against Black People in Just Mercy by Bryan Stevenson*

Some of the stereotyped attitudes experienced by black people appear in the book *Just Mercy* by Bryan Stevenson. One of them is experience by Herbert Richardson, a Vietnam war veteran who is arrested for the murder of a small child who is hit by a bomb that Herbert planted in his yard. Herbert is detained because he is at the location when the bomb exploded. It doesn't take long for the police to make an arrest. They find pipes and other bomb-making materials in Herbert's car and front yard. This case becomes a capital crime because Herbert is not a local resident

“After striking all of the black prospective jurors in a county that is 28 percent black, the prosecutor told the all-white jury in his closing argument that a conviction was appropriate because Herbert was “associated with Black Muslims from New York City” and deserved no mercy (Stevenson, 2014:76)”

Based on the quote above, the law enforcement officers decided not to pardon and lighten Herbert's sentence because Herbert had been in contact with black Muslims in New York City as mentioned “...Herbert is “associated with Black Muslims from New York City” and deserved no mercy.”. In America, Black Muslims are stereotyped as terrorists who threatened national security. Because of the negative stereotypes about black Muslims that have become commonplace in America, Herbert is racially discriminated against by getting a sentence and not getting a pardon from the trial jury. Herbert is sentenced to death. This shows that as a result of negative stereotypes against a race, a person can get a severe punishment and even get the death penalty.

### 3.2.2 *Prejudice Toward Black People in Just Mercy by Bryan Stevenson*

In this book, prejudice is often shown against black people. It can be seen through several quotes that prove the prejudiced attitude experienced by some people who are told in the book. The first quote shows the prejudice experienced by the author of this book, Bryan Stevenson. This happened while he is on his way home from work when suddenly he is stopped for no reason by police officers when he is almost arrive at his apartment complex. He is brandished a gun and his car is illegally searched by police officers. When he asked why they do that to him when he is just riding in the car listening to music after work, the police officer replied with a statement that contained prejudice against Stevenson. “The older officer frowned at me. “Someone called about the suspected thief. There's a lot of robbery in this neighborhood.” Then he smirked. “We will let you go. You should be happy,” he said.” (Stevenson, 2014:40). The quote shows the attitude of police officers who have bad prejudice against Stevenson. The narrative that shows the prejudice against Stevenson is “Someone called about the suspected thief. There's a lot of robbery in this neighborhood”. The sentence shows that the policeman has a negative prejudice against Stevenson, who knows nothing about theft cases

in this neighborhood. When Stevenson asked why he is stopped and even searched, the police officer suddenly answered that someone has called that there are thieves in the neighborhood where Stevenson lived. The officer had the suspicion that Stevenson could have been the thief. The officer had this prejudice against Stevenson simply because Stevenson was black and not a native of the neighborhood

### **3.2.3 Racial Profiling Against Black People in *Just Mercy* by Bryan Stevenson**

Racial profiling is the act of suspecting, targeting, or discriminating against someone based on their ethnicity or religion, not based on individual suspicion. In this book, you can find the racial profiling of the government and police officers towards civilians, most of whom are of African American race. As experienced by a black young man who was shot and killed by a police officer for a minor traffic violation after running a red light. He is shot because he is accused of carrying a weapon when he is stopped by police officers, as told in the book "The police claimed he was reaching for a weapon—no weapon was ever found—and the teen was shot dead while he sat in his car." (Stevenson, 2014:36) Police said the young man is trying to reach for his gun when he is stopped by police officers. But the young man's parents denied it and said that their child is not trying to reach for a weapon but the young man ducked down trying to reach his gym bag to take out the sim he just got. And apparently, it was not proven that the young man is carrying a weapon as suspected by the police "The police claimed he was reaching for a weapon". The evidence says that none of the weapons are in the young man's car.

## **4 CONCLUSION**

The writer finds two forms of discrimination, namely direct discrimination and indirect discrimination. Direct discrimination is an act of discrimination that is carried out directly against the victim because of a dislike for something that is in the victim, for example, because of racial differences. This treatment is mostly done by white people to black people. This book found some direct discrimination treatment received by the clients of Bryan Stevenson who is dominated by black people. The treatment is shown using violence, invasion of privacy, indifference, and even murder.. In addition to direct discrimination, this book also finds indirect discrimination. Indirect discrimination can be seen through regulations in which in its implementation there is discrimination against a certain group. In addition to discrimination, this book also finds racial discrimination. The writer also analyzes how the author of this book describes the racial discrimination in the book. The writer finds three ways the author of the book describes racial discrimination. The first is racial discrimination through stereotypes, the second is prejudice and the third is racial profiling.

In this study, in research question number one, direct discrimination appears most often in this book. Because this book tells about Bryan Stevenson's journey as a lawyer who handled cases of black people who received discrimination treatment from white people, there are many descriptions of direct discrimination treatment by white people against black people who are Bryan Stevenson's clients. In addition, of the three analyzes of stereotypes, prejudice, and racial profiling for the second research question, the most common is racial profiling. Because many of Stevenson's clients are victims of racial profiling from the police, many even get the death penalty as a result of the racial

profiling. From this research, the writer hopes that this research is useful to provide information about how racial discrimination appears around us through analysis and examples taken from the book *Just Mercy* by Bryan Stevenson.

## REFERENCES

- Bowling, B., & Phillips, C. (2001). *Racism, Crime And Justice*.
- Bungin, Burhan. (2007). *Penelitian Kualitatif: Komunikasi, Ekonomi, Kebijakan Publik dan Ilmu Sosial lainnya*. Jakarta: Putra Grafika
- Creswell, J., & David Creswell, J. (2018). *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches*.
- Dovidio, J., Hewstone, M., Glick, P., & Esses, V. (2010). *Prejudice, Stereotyping and Discrimination: Theoretical and Empirical Overview*.
- Franzoi, S. L. (1996). *Social Psychology*. Pennsylvania: McGraw-Hill Education.
- Laurenson, D, & Swingewood, A (1972). *The sociology of literature.*, Paladin
- Lippert-rasmussen, Kasper. (2013). *Indirect Discrimination.*
- Lukens, J . (2003). *A Critical Handbook of Children's Literature*. Boston, New York: Person Education, Inc.
- Stevenson, B. (2014). *Just Mercy*. America: Spiegel & Grau.