

Racism presented in Colson Whitehead's *The Nickel Boys*

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Abstract. This thesis is about racism that occurs in the novel *The Nickel Boys* by Colson Whitehead. The purpose of writing this thesis is to describe the types of racism and how the main characters Elwood and Turner struggle to face the acts of racism happening to them. This thesis uses an extrinsic approach, that is sociological approach to describe the text in the novel by connecting it to sociological theory. To analyze the types of racism, The theory of Carmichael and Hamilton identifies two forms of racism: individual racism and institutional racism. Individual racism happen includes behaviors that cause a person to experience death, injury, and denial of services. Meanwhile, institutional racism involves an institution that has a huge negative impact on access, services, and opportunities for minority groups. Individual racism occurs when black students experience violence that causes injury and death, such as the beatings and torture experienced by black students. Institutional racism occurs because of policies enacted at Nickel Academy that are detrimental to black students, such as behavioral differences between white and black students and poor facilities that are only experienced by black students. In the novel, it is mentioned that the individual and institutional racism experienced by black students resulted in their injuries, denial of services and even death. In the novel, it is found that the main character struggles to deal with racism by running away from Nickel Academy.

Keywords : *individual racism, institutional racism, racial acts, violence, struggle*

INTRODUCTION

Racism is an ideology that holds that certain races are stronger and have the right to rule over others. Racism is behaviour based on the belief that one particular race is superior to another. The term "racist" is for people who subscribe to racism, while racism itself is the belief that other communities are inherently inferior to one's own (Gelles & Levine, 1999). Racism occurs because a person or group considers others inferior or ignored based on origin, race, colour, religion, and gender, resulting in social, economic, and political injustice and inequality (Beech et al., 2021). It also refers to beliefs, behaviours, or systems that emphasise racial differences and result in discrimination, oppression, or unfair treatment of individuals or groups based on their race or ethnicity.

Racism is an ideology that can affect individual and societal aspects. racism can also be defined as an inherent belief about one race being the primary arbiter of being superior or inferior to other races or certain individuals differently according to their race

designation. racism also means a belief that people should be treated differently according to their race (Richard Dawkins, 1989:17). This to signify that racism is a belief that disparages an individual or group based on racial differences. Racism can be divided into two types, namely individual racism and institutional racism. Both include aspects contained in racism and are interrelated although they have different meanings. Racism always occurs through reciprocal interactions between the personal biases and actions of individuals and the systemic racial discrimination enforced by institutions through their laws, norms, and policies (Bourne, 2001). According to (Tatum, 2017:45-47) racism is a behavior that can affect interactions in everyday society and occurs in several aspects that cover life including work, education, and social relationships. Tatum argues that, institutional racism and individual racism mutually create an environment where racial discrimination can occur and develop.

Racism is an interesting topic to discuss, because racism involves social inequality that occurs between races. This makes some novelists voice their opinions through a literary work, for example, a novel entitled *The Nickel Boys* by Colson Whitehead. Through his novel, Colson Whitehead discusses the individual and institutional racist behavior that occurs at Nickel Academy and how Elwood and Turner the main characters deal with racist behavior. This research will discuss about types of racism occur in the novel untitled *The Nickel Boys* and the struggle of the main characters in facing the racism they face.

The reason for choosing this novel as a data source is because racism is one of the topics that occur in society related to the social conditions that occur in society. In this novel, several racisms committed by the main character, especially individual racism and institutional racism are described which illustrate the reality of racism that occurs in social life and also this novel describes how the main character's way and struggle to escape from the racist environment he experiences. There are two objectives of study. The first one is what types of racism are portrayed in the novel *The Nickel Boys* and the second one is how do Elwood and Turner as the main characters struggle to face the racism in the novel *The Nickel Boys*.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Literary sociology theory is an approach in the study of literature that sees literary works not only as products of art, but also as a result of social processes. This approach emphasizes the way literary works portray social structures, conflicts, and power relations in society. According to David Carter, in his book "Literary Theory and Sociology" (2006), mentions that a key aspect of the sociology of literature is the interplay between writers, their literary works, and society. He contends that writers are not solitary creators but are shaped by the social, political, and economic conditions of their time.

Sociology refers to the basic principles of society and represents human life (Swingewood & Rich, 1986:336). Literary sociology can highlight the significance of a literary work. According to Laurenson and Swingewood, the sociology of literature should address three aspects: race, modern life, and the environment. Familiarity with these aspects can enable researchers to comprehend the sociology of literature. Understanding sociology and its connection to everyday life is crucial. Sociology can greatly enhance human understanding of social issues and life (Laurenson & Swingewood, 1972:56). One of which is about racism. Racism is a system that assumes

essential differences between human races that determine not only their physical traits but also their intellectual and moral abilities. The theory of racism is rooted not only in prejudice but also the institutionalization of discrimination that systematically places one group above another based on race. It emphasizes that racial discrimination can occur without explicit racist intentions because it is embedded in institutional frameworks. George F. Fredrickson (2002:56) states that individual racism is evident in behaviors that lead to discriminatory outcomes, often stemming from personal stereotypes and prejudices. This attitude involves discriminatory beliefs and actions by individuals against others based on racial differences.

On the other hand, institutional racism is racism that includes various procedures, practices, and policies that favor one particular racial group over another racial group in the environment (Better, 2008; Paradies, 2016). This results in an imbalance in racial power by excluding certain groups from access, production, control over information, as well as material and symbolic resources. (Paradies, 2016). According to Carmichael and Hamilton (1967:20) in Henricks (2016:1), racism is an attitude that is open and can be hidden. This is related to two interrelated forms, namely individual actions by white people towards black people, and actions by the entire white community towards the black community. Racism is categorized into individual racism and institutional racism according to Carmichael and Hamilton.

1. **Individual Racism:** Individual racism occurs when a person of a certain race makes policies and acts violently against another race. This results in injury, denial of services, or even death.
2. **Institutional Racism:** Institutional racism is an attitude of a majority race towards a minority race that occurs within an institution. Institutional racism is more subtle but equally damaging, it occurs through a practice, a policy, to a procedure within an institution that has a negative impact on racial minorities.

METHOD

This research uses a sociological approach, because the novel talks about the problems relating to race in society. According to Wellek and Warren (1956:94), The sociological approach is used to find the relationship between a literary work and situations that have a social impact on political, social and economic systems. This research used descriptive qualitative which explains the facts, circumstances, and phenomena that occur. According to Creswell (2014:14-15) the descriptive qualitative approach is one of the most frequently used methods in social research because it is able to provide an in-depth and detailed description of a particular situation or context. In doing the research, the data are taken from the novel, therefore the novel that entitled *The Nickel Boys* by Colson Whitehead. It consists of 224 pages. The data are form of phrases, sentences, and group of sentences that explain the types of racism and how Elwood and Turner face the racism. The data are collected by reading the novel, looking for the types of racism, marking sentences that refer to the element of racism, and classifying the data from the novel. After being collected, the data are analyzed by analyzing the classified data that relating the analyzed data with the theories of racism accordint to Carmichael and Hamilton, and concluding the analysis.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

This novel is analyzed within the context of racism, specifically focusing on the two types identified as individual racism and institutional racism and explains how the main characters named Elwood and Turner struggle to deal with racism at Nickel Academy.

Individual Racism

This section describe and analyze the individual racism that occurs in Colson Whitehead's *The Nickel Boys*. In this section, it describes how prejudice and discriminatory acts committed by several individuals including school staff, school guards, the sheriff, white students, and even fellow students of color impact the lives of the main characters named Elwood and Turner.

¹³ “Elwood said “Hey,” and took a step forward.

Black Mike spun around, slugged him in the jaw and knocked him back against the sink”. (Whitehead, 2019:43).

This incident occurred in the bathroom. At that time Elwood sees Black Mike who is bullying someone named Corey. Elwood can not bear to see Corey being bullied by Black Mike. On one occasion Elwood also tries to break them up by saying "Hey" and he steps forward. Black Mike immediately turns around and hits Elwood's jaw and makes him crash into the sink. The scene above shows how easily physical violence can occur in the Nickel Academy environment. Even though Elwood tries to be kind but he experiences violence committed by Black Mike. Elwood experiences individual racism since he is injured by a blow from Black Mike.

When Black Mike is hitting Elwood, a boy named Chuck who wants to get out of the bathroom, meets Phil and he says "oh, shit". Phil is a staff of Nickel Academy and he is walking around to see the situation at Nickel Academy. Phil, chooses to ignore the beating that clearly happens in front of him. When Phil goes into the bathroom and meets the black students, Phil casually says "what are you little niggers up to?" The above condition is proved in the following quotation.

¹⁰ “Another boy opened the bathroom door and yelled, “Oh, shit.” Phil, one of the white housemen, was making the rounds...

This day Phil said, “What are you little niggers up to?” (Whitehead, 2019:43).

The incident above illustrates the individual racism experienced by Elwood and the other black students. The racial slurs uttered by Phil intends to demean and insult the black students. This is supported by the use of the word "nigger". The situation above is included in individual racism committed by Phil by insulting based on a race by using demeaning language which is included in the form of mockery and insults.

¹⁵ “Elwood told them, had socked him in the stomach for talking to a white student, a kid he’d met in the hospital. (Whitehead, 2019:84)”

The quotation above describes an incident experienced by Elwood who experiences violence from a supervisor at Nickel Academy. Elwood is beaten on his stomach by a supervisor because Elwood talk to a white student he meets at the hospital. Elwood recounts this incident to his friends and the students listens by nodding their heads as if it made sense. However, the students knows that the real reason is just the superintendent wanting to take out his anger on Elwood. Socialization at Nickel

Academy is limited by racial differences. This is used as a basis for treating students unfairly. The violent scene experienced by Elwood is a clear example of violence driven by institutional racism. The superintendents commit acts of violence and injustice to ensure that black students remain subservient and isolated from white students.

Institutional Racism

This section explores the acts of institutional racism that occur at Nickel Academy in Colson Whitehead's *The Nickel Boys*. Black students always experience more violence and discrimination than white students. Through the events that happen to Elwood and Turner, it can be seen how racism is embedded¹¹ in the systems and policies of an institution that is supposed to protect and educate students.

"Nurse Wilma was almost sweet to the white boys who came in with¹² their abrasions and ailments, a second mother. Nary a kind word for the black boys. "Do they do it like that to everybody?" Elwood asked Turner after lunch. Nurse Wilma had distributed ham sandwiches and watery grape juice, white kids first. (Whitehead, 2019:50-55)".

In the quotation above, nurse Wilma is always sweet to the white students. When the white students come to see Nurse Wilma, she takes care of them like a second mother to the white students. In contrast, she never speaks kindly to the black students. When she takes care of Elwood, she feels that Elwood's bedpan bothers her a lot. She feels that it is as if Elwood is urinating on her hand and nurse Wilma had a face that refuses to treat him. She also swears like a sailor. After lunch, Elwood asks Turner about Nurse Wilma distributing ham sandwiches and diluted grape juice to the white students first. This situation reflects an act of institutional racism where one of the nurses makes a difference in treatment based on race.

"The theater was showing *The Ugly American*—if you had seventy-five cents and the right skin color, you could see Marlon Brando. The sheriff and his deputies had installed themselves on the sidewalk in dark sunglasses, arms crossed. A group of whites jeered and taunted behind the policemen, and more white men trotted down the street to join them. (Whitehead, 2019:20)".

The above quotation describes a cinema that is screening a play called *The Ugly America*. To gain access into the cinema, one must have the right skin color to get into the cinema and if one wants to see Marlon Brando, one must pay seventy-five cents and have the right skin color, which is described as white. The sheriff and his deputies stand on the sidewalk, wearing sunglasses and crossing their arms in a condescending manner towards black people. This is followed by a group of white people mocking and jeering behind the Sheriff and his deputies. This situation explains institutional racism because there are policies and rules that are detrimental to the black¹⁹ race. This is in accordance with Charmichael and Hamilton's statement that reads "Institutional racism involves policies, practices, and processes¹⁹ within institutions that disproportionately harm racial minorities by limiting their access to and the quality of goods, services, and opportunities".

In the summer of 1945, one young boy died of heart failure while locked in a sweatbox, a popular corrective at that time, and the medical examiner called it natural causes....

The fire of 1921 claimed twenty-three lives. Half the dormitory exits were bolted shut and the two boys in the dark third-floor cells were prevented from escaping. (Whitehead, 2019:102)”

The quotation above shows two incidents that are suspected to be Nickel Academy's negligence. In the first incident, a boy dies of heart failure due to being locked up in a hot box called "sweetbox". Sweetbox means that the room is made to discipline the students and the room is designed with a narrow size and heat, which results in the victim experiencing heart failure and a weak physical condition. In the second incident, twenty-three lives are lost due to a fire in 1921. One of the causes of the many fatalities is that half of the dormitory exits are sealed. Based on some of the above incidents, there is an element of institutional racism that illustrates how bad conditions at Nickel Academy where negligence and neglect cause tragic deaths for students.

Elwood's and Turner's Struggle to Face Racism

This part presents the analysis of how Elwood and Turner deal with racism in Colson Whitehead's *The Nickel Boys*. The main character, Elwood, tries to deal with injustice and racist attitudes in a hopeful way. Meanwhile, the more skeptical Turner uses a defensive strategy to avoid direct conflict. The novel is set in the 1960s when there is a fictional reform school called Nickel Academy. With the events that happen to Elwood and Turner, it can be seen how racism affects their way of acting and surviving. “Elwood decided: By June he'd climb the merit ladder out of this pit, four months short of what that judge gave him. (Whitehead, 2019:59)”

The quotation above describes Elwood's who realizes the difficulty of avoiding problems related to racism at Nickel Academy. Despite his best efforts, problems keep popping up unexpectedly and ensnaring him. When one of the staff from Nickel Academy doesn't like someone's smile, they will immediately land a punch right in his face. This action also becomes one of the reasons for Elwood to get out of Nickel Academy. The quotation above describes the challenges Elwood faces and how Elwood deals with the acts of racism that happen to him. The relationship with racism here is illustrated by Elwood who has to deal with an unfair system and a racist environment. This situation is described as a form of struggle for Elwood's efforts. This fact is explained in the quotation which reads “Elwood decided: By June he'd climb the merit ladder out of this pit, four months short of what that judge gave him”.

“I let you down, El,” she said.

“I'm okay,” he said.

“I just made Explorer...”

He kept his head down and was rewarded. Just like they wanted. There were four ways out. In the throes of his next midnight spell Elwood decided there was a fifth way. Get rid of Nickel. (Whitehead, 2019:111)”

In the quotation above, Elwood is talking to his grandmother. Since, his grandmother has disappointed him. However, Elwood does not care about that. He still calms her down by saying that Elwood is fine. Elwood has planned something to leave Nickel Academy. Elwood has become an explorer which meant he has explored the intricacies of Nickel Academy and finds a way out of Nickel. In the middle of the night, Elwood

starts to get restless. His mind keeps spinning, looking for a way out of the misery at Nickel Academy. Finally, he finds the fifth way, that is by, destroying Nickel. Elwood thinks that this is not just an escape plan, but, this is one way to end the source of suffering and injustice that he has experienced with his friends.

7 “He’d copied over his list of four months of deliveries and recipients, the names and dates and goods exchanged, the bags of rice and tins of peaches, the sides of beef 8 d Christmas hams. He added three lines about the White House and Black Beauty. He didn’t put his name down, to kid himself that they wouldn’t know the author’s identity. They’d know he was the snitch, of course, but they’d be in jail. (Whitehead, 2019:125-126)” In the quotation above, Elwood copies and rewrite the list of goods shipped and received over the past four months. It includes the names, dates, and types of goods exchanged, sacks of rice, pieces of beef, etc. The letter also notes about Griff disappearing after the boxing championship. Everything is written using the best language according to Elwood. Elwood does not put his name on the note. This also keeps anyone from knowing who writes the letter. Elwood knows the risks he is taking, but he feels that this is one way to reveal the truth and seek justice for the students at Nickel Academy.

CONCLUSION

After analyzing the novel, it can be concluded that there are two types of racism that occur and how the main character struggles to face racism in the Nickel Academy environment as depicted in the novel *The Nickel Boys*.

Individual racism occurs when someone of a certain race makes policies and acts violently against another race. This results in injury, denial of services, or even death. Meanwhile, individual racism is depicted in the form of violence. The accusations made against black students by supervisors and physical violence committed by supervisors against black students which resulted in black students being injured. This is illustrated by the incident that happened to Elwood where he was beaten by a supervisor named Spencer and a child named Chuck experienced verbal violence committed by supervisors while in the Nickel academy environment.

Meanwhile, Institutional racism is an attitude of a majority race towards a minority race that occurs within an institution. Institutional racism is more subtle but equally damaging, it occurs through a practice, a policy, to a procedure within an institution that has a negative impact on racial minorities. This is illustrated by several incidents, namely nurses at Nickel Academy treating students badly, policies given by Nickel Academy to black students unfairly, and differences in violence committed by supervisors to black students. Nickel Academy seems to allow and even support the above behaviors in everyday life. This is illustrated by how a nurse named Wilma who treats white students better than blacks, sheriffs and whites who mock blacks who are demonstrating for justice, and Nickel Academy's negligence that caused some of its students to die due to a fire that occurred at Nickel Academy.

In *The Nickel Boys*, Whitehead also discusses how the main characters Elwood and Turner struggle to deal with racism that occurs in the Nickel Academy environment. This is illustrated by the incident that Elwood recorded all the events and violence that occurred at Nickel Academy and Turner helped Elwood to send letters to the outside world, how Elwood dedicated his life to trying to get out of Nickel Academy. In the end, they plan to escape from Nickel Academy. Unfortunately, Elwood was shot while

Turner managed to escape. At the end of the story, several years later, Turner lives and Elwood Curtis exposes the atrocities committed by Nickel Academy.

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