



Debunking Black Stereotypes Through Gray Matter Play Script By Jeanette D. Farr

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Article Info

Article History:

Received

12 October 2021

Approved

13 November 2021

Published

12 December 2021

Keywords: Debunking black stereotypes, Racism, Stereotypes, Social psychology

Abstract

Black stereotypes have emerged over centuries in The United States of America. A long history of slavery and injustice practices have constructed some images of those who are born black in that country. This study focuses on debunking black stereotypes in the play script entitled Gray Matter by Jeanette D. Farr. The qualitative approach is used in the discussion of this study; the main character's dialogues are analysed by using Judd and Park (1993) theory about stereotypes and Franzoi (2009) social psychology theory. The results of this study showed black stereotypes practices towards Afro-American including: 'black man is criminal', 'black is dirty', and 'black comes from lower society'. Eventually, the interpersonal relationship between the two characters is deepened and resulted on the debunking of all the stereotypes upon Russell.

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INTRODUCTION

A few months ago the world was shocked by the case that happened to George Floyd (46), a black citizen, by a police officer earlier in Minneapolis, United States. This information spread widely after a video circulating showing a policeman named Derek Chauvin (44) locking George Floyd's neck with his knee helplessly and can only beg for help with the words "I can't breathe" and ends dying. The case provoked the anger of many parties and sparked the issue of racism in the United States. Many Americans who protested that led to chaos, they voiced anger at George's death due to the attitude of the Minneapolis police who were considered racist and inhuman. This case caught the world's attention and the slogan Black Lives Matter was voiced by many people, including politicians, public figures, and activists who were one voice condemned the action.

Black Lives Matter is a movement that aims to provide understanding to citizens and the public regarding cases of injustice experienced by the African-American community. For example, being considered dangerous, being prohibited from entering certain places, experiencing racial discrimination, experiencing differences in legal services, and so on. Black Lives Matter started in 2013, after an activist in California named Alicia Garza wrote a post on Facebook stating — Black people. I love you. I love us!. He wrote "Our lives matter." George Floyd's death shows how black people were subjected to excessive violence. The deaths of countless black men and women are a form of "genocide," according to Benjamin Crump (a civil rights lawyer who has worked on many racial discrimination cases, and will now represent the Floyd family). He stated that Floyd's murder followed the same pattern of systematic racism that led to violent stereotypes.

Stereotypes are judgments of a person based solely on perceptions of the group into which that person can be categorized. Stereotypes are thought shortcuts that are done intuitively by humans to simplify complex things and help in making decisions quickly. Stereotypes affect how a person processes and interprets information. According to Franzoi (2008, p.199) stereotypes are beliefs about people that place them into one category and do not allow for individual variation. This social trust is learned from others and is maintained through the rules of social interaction. The most common stereotypes in our society are based on gender and membership in ethnic groups or occupations. Gender stereotypes are beliefs about the differences in traits or attributes possessed by men and women. People respect men more than women and this factor plays an important role in discrimination in the workplace for women. Sometimes it happens that a woman who has high work performance does not get a position that matches her achievement because she is a woman. Gender stereotypes tend to say that women are emotional, obedient, illogical, passive, whereas men tend to be emotional, dominant, logical and aggressive.

Social issues occur not only in the real world. Literary works, as a reflection of the author, also reflect matters relating to the situation and conditions of society, including stereotypical issues. Drama script as a form of literary work that will later be staged, also contains many stereotypical issues, especially towards certain ethnic groups or races. The word drama itself comes from the Greek

which means action while a drama script is a text that contains dialogue with a description of the characters in it, which functions as a literary script (to be read) or a script to be performed. Throughout history, stereotypes treatment to Afro-American can be spotlight. In the world of stage performance, there was a stereotype performance called Blackface. Blackface is a style of theatrical makeup in the United States and Britain, used to influence the facial features of iconic, American racist archetypes: those of "darky" or "coon" (both racial terminologies). White blackface performers typically use burnt cork and then oil paint or shoe polish to blacken their skin and exaggerate their lips, often wearing wool wigs, gloves, tailcoats, or ragged clothing to complete the transformation. The performance of the singer depicts and reviles black people in stereotypical ways and often dismissive, as silly, lazy, clownish, superstitious, joyful, and musical. However, in the object of this study, the black stereotypes are shown throughout the play script and from there, the analysis begins.

The object of analysis is a playscript entitled *Gray Matter* by Jeannette D. Farr. The play script presents the main character, Russell (21), who is an Afro-American male in baggy clothes and baseball cap. He goes to a police station to return a wallet that he has found earlier. In the police station, he meets a 66-year-old white lady named Marge who quickly moves her bag farther from Russell and tucks it close even without seeing Russell's face. She does it in such instance for noticing the Russell's skin colour. Their conversation continues with a thick atmosphere of black stereotypes about Russell for being an Afro-American. Therefore this study aims at revealing black stereotypes toward the main character Russell by Marge. The analysis focused on the main character's dialogues and interaction and analyzed by using social psychology theories.

METHOD

In conducting this study, a play script is taken to be an object. The script was written by Jeannette D. Farr with the title *Gray Matter*. This is a script of a one-act-play with a thick atmosphere of racism and stereotypes. The object is analyzed by the theory of Stereotypes by Judd and Park (1993) and Franzoi (2009). The purpose of the study is to find out black stereotypes portrayed in the drama and historic reasons why such phenomenon happened during the era by the wrap of post-colonial study. The approach used in this study is qualitative descriptive method.

Qualitative approach is functioned in developing the data collection process by doing surveys by spreading of research implements, analysis and data depiction. According to Kothari (2004), the explanation of the state of matters as what lives today as the main objective of descriptive research or study. Moreover, by doing a descriptive study it is possible for us to analyze different kinds of factors that can stimulate people to act in certain way or create people's preferences to like or dislike certain things. Macky and Gass (2005) believe that the term of qualitative research is possible to state to research that is built on descriptive data when statistical procedures are not necessary to be done often. This is what is applied in this study. The object is analyzed through the dialogues and stage directions in the play script which make any statistical process unnecessary to be done.

FINDING AND DISCUSSION

Gray Matter play script written by Jeanette D. Farr is fulfilled by a thick atmosphere of racial issues mainly on stereotypes of a black Afro-American man namely Russell (21) through his interaction with a middle-aged white lady namely Marge (66). From the very beginning of the script, D. Farr portrays Russell with casual outfit of an Afro-American, “baggy clothes and baseball caps” (D. Farr, 1999, p. 2). Still at the same opening of the drama, she contrasts Russell’s outfit to Marge’s. D. Farr uses “well-dressed” outfit (D. Farr, 1999, p. 2) for Marge as a white born lady. From the dictions that she uses in portraying those two contrasting characters, D. Farr tries to lead the audiences to easily catch the issue highlighted in the drama, black stereotypes.

Stereotypes has become generalizations about certain group of people that often harshly believed despite it is proven or not to be true. Regardless any of that, Judd and Park (1993) believes that stereotypes assimilated into individual’s belief system. Here in this chapter, some of black stereotypes are shown but in the end all prejudices about that dimmed and seemed to vanish from the white lady’s mind.

1. Stereotype 1: Black man is a criminal

The first stereotype and most often shown in the drama is that ‘Black man is a criminal’. It is told in the first stage direction of the drama that Marge moves her purse as soon as Russell gets into the police station waiting room even without seeing him. She just notices that a black man just comes into the room and her instinct makes her do that. That movements becomes her ‘self-protection’ at the very first moment of their interaction. It is stated in data 1 as follow,

[Data 1]

MARGE is sitting in a middle seat in the row of chairs. She is reading, doing a crossword puzzle, knitting - something to occupy her time. SHE has her purse on the seat next to her. RUSSELL enters, looks around notices sign, signs in, then moves to find a seat. MARGE, not looking up, moves her purse to the other side of her and tucks it close. (D. Farr, 1999, p. 2)

Through Marge’s movements, she has already assumed the worst about Russell based on stereotypical assumption only from his race and attire. She ignores his conservative gesture of signing-in and unintentionally insults him. Despite of keeping his heartbreak, Russell tries to start conversation and clear things with Marge which becomes a good deed as a black man that is assumed as a criminal.

[Data 2]

RUSSEL: I saw that. MARGE: Excuse me?
RUSSELL: I caught you.
MARGE: I don’t know you.
RUSSELL: When I walked in, you moved your bag.
MARGE: Please. I don’t want any trouble.
RUSSELL: I’m not-

MARGE: Because if you're causing trouble, I can notify someone.
RUSSELL: I wasn't- (D. Farr, 1999, p. 2)

Data 2 showed Russell is actually trying to debunk possible misconceptions that he is a criminal by trying to open up a conversation. Unfortunately, what Marge says by assuming that he would put her in trouble hurts him even more. She has never met him before, nor saw him in any criminal list earlier, though. But her bad assumption about him has reached him and triggers him to state the unspoken stereotype himself by saying — When I walked through that door you thought: Rapist, murderer, purse-stealer (D. Farr, 1999, p. 4). This statement shows that Russell has completely been familiar of the stereotype of being 'a criminal'.

According to Franzoi (2009) there are some factors to emerge any stereotype including: family, peers, school, mass media, and society. The way Russell realizes the stereotype that is stuck on him as his identity, shows that there are some unrevealed factors in the drama that make him say so. In this drama, the factor which is highlighted by D. Farr is 'the society'. Marge, who represents white race society, makes that assumption without realizing whether it discriminates others or not. Marge herself may not assume so without experiencing or getting the idea from the mentioned factors. As a white-born- woman, there must be a lot of information about black stereotypes that she heard previously, which then urges her to defend herself from what so called 'black- bad-people' by building gap in a form of assumption between her race and the Afro-American man.

Marge seemed to be uncomfortable along the beginning until the middle of their conversation. Her reaction when Russell teases her reveals her restlessness of having him near her. She then even decides to sit on the farthest seat from Russell which becomes another depiction of her 'self-protection'. In the drama, it is shown this way;

[Data 3]

RUSSELL: Do you mind if I try yours? This one isn't right either. How bout you let me sit on your lap.
(MARGE goes to counter and rings the bell.)
RUSSELL: Wait, wait, lady! I was only joking. Sit back down!
MARGE: Will you leave me alone?
RUSSELL: I'll be nice. I'll even sit over here if it'll make you happy.
(MARGE sits far away from RUSSELL.) (D. Farr, 1999, p. 5)

Although Russell another attempt to open up a conversation used a joke, his debunking effort to avoid misunderstanding is still failed. Marge's assumption about the stereotype is then spoken out after several provoking verbal and non-verbal communication that Russell made many times earlier. She then admitted that she only follows her instinct, — I followed my instincts. When the fight or flight kicks in you should listen to that. What you just said about you being a criminal was exactly what my gut was telling me (D. Farr, 1999, p. 6). The use of 'instinct' in protecting herself becomes the evidence that the 'criminal' stereotype on black man has already planted on her mind long before

they see each other. It becomes unfair for Russell, which we know from the drama has never committed any crime to her previously, to be treated so.

2. Stereotype 2: Black is dirty

The second black stereotype that is shown in this drama is 'black is dirty'. It is a very basic knowledge that cleanliness is not represented by any certain complexion or any race. However, in reality, many commercials often lead people to think that 'white is clean', or 'white is beauty'. And more severely it is not seldom to happen, those who do not think their complexion is white or bright enough to under seen themselves. This happens not merely because of the commercials fault, but more to the perception of the society about non-white- people, in this case the Afro-American. The perception repeatedly leads to bullying and discrimination of the Afro-American. Portrayal of the stereotype is shown this way in the drama.

[Data 4]

RUSSEL: (...) Thank you. Thank you for letting me know you can actually see or FEEL through your instinctual animal feelings that there is criminal written all over my face.

MARGE: I'm sure if you dressed a little better, that might help too.

RUSSELL: Maybe kick down a few bucks, get a nice suit or something....

MARGE: Clean yourself up a little.

RUSSELL: Sure. Thanks. You've really helped me uh... ()

(D. Farr, 1999, p. 6)

Statements as 'dressed a little better' has clearly shown us that Marge thinks that the outfit that Russell wears at that moment (the baggy clothes and a baseball cap), represents that he is untidy person. She also generalizes such outfit to be a 'criminal outfit' rather than fashion that actually every person has the right to choose what to wear, which contradicts the American Value. In reality, nowadays baggy clothes have become fashion that is commonly worn. Meanwhile, her statement leads Russell to think that he should get a nice suit to not be perceived as a perpetrator. Such thought can mislead people's perception and discriminates those who do not use to that kind of outfit.

Furthermore, Marge also asks Russell to clean himself up. She says that without considering any of Russell's feeling who listens to her statement. Yet, Russell, does not want to talk about that any longer. He covers up that he actually is hurt by changing topic of their conversation.

3. Stereotype 3: Black comes from lower society

The third black stereotype that is shown in this drama is 'black comes from lower society'. This stereotype becomes one of some outputs of long-slavery history of the Afro-American in the USA. Their ancestor, who formerly forced to work under slavery and suffered from many discriminations and oppressions, lived in poverty and became lower society. Even though it happened hundreds of years earlier and many things have changed to the race, some negative stereotypes, including this one, remains. In the drama this issue is shown nearly the end of the script.

[Data 5]

RUSSELL: I'm here on my lunch hour, man! (To himself) I can't come back to work late, they'll have my ass.

MARGE: Where do you work?

RUSSELL: Excuse me?

MARGE: Your job. Where do you have to go?

RUSSELL: I get it. (Pause) I have a job, so it's ok to talk to me, now.

MARGE: I just wondered how far you had to walk.

RUSSELL: I drove myself down here. Jesus, lady! We LIBERALS have cars too, you know. Maybe not nice ones like you folks but at least it gets me from point A to point B, and I bought it with hard earned workin' man's money.

MARGE I didn't mean- (D. Farr, 1999, p. 10)

At this point, Marge shows her sympathy to Russell. But, again, her sympathy touched sensitive issue about his color. She does not even consider Russell as someone who can afford any transportation to get to his destinations. This insults Russell as that perception relates to what happen to his ancestors in the state. In reality, rights of Afro-American has been struggled and changed quite drastically comparing to what happened in the slavery era. Again, Russell may not be so sensitive about the issue if he has never treated differently many times earlier.

In the end of the story, Russell finally managed to debunk stereotypes delivered by Marge. The long quarrel between the two contrasting people from different race that has started from the two third of the drama ended when Russell bold statements:

[Data 6]

RUSSELL: Why did you assume that I was a criminal? Was it because of this?

(HE points to the palm of his hand.)

MARGE: Your hand?

RUSSELL: No. Closer. Look. Right here. See it?

(MARGE moves closer to his hand, she is curious. Just as she gets close enough he forms his hand into a fist.)

MARGE: I don't see anything.

RUSSELL: Simple as that. (HE points to his fist) Black. (HE points to her face) and white.

(There is a long pause. Just as MARGE is about to speak, RUSSELL goes over to the counter, leans over, and looks around.) (D. Farr, 1999, p. 9)

Russell shows that the significant difference that made a huge gap between them is color. The dialogue in data 6 showed that Marge is caught and slapped with the reality that she has been a racist woman. In the end she eventually realized that Russell actually went to the police station to return Marge's precious wallet, with gold card in it. Marge becomes amazed by what Russell does in contrast to what her prejudices and assumptions about Russell from the beginning of their meeting. The end of the drama unveils the truth that black stereotypes that stick to the Afro-American are not true. It reveals that stereotypes are unfair judgments. They give labels that should not be generalized over any race. This drama shows us that stereotyping perception can be diminished by respecting each other.

CONCLUSION

Stereotypes over Afro-American are severely implanted in the U.S. society. This phenomenon often impacts practices of prejudice and extreme racism which have impacted to the inequalities of Afro-American people, especially men. This issue is presented by Jeannette D. Farr in this one-act-drama. The drama primarily portrays race relations more specifically about black stereotypes over a young black man namely Russell perceived by an old lady namely Marge. Through language and intense conversation, the conflict plays itself out in perceptions of self and other. Three types of stereotypes emerged: 'black man is criminal', 'black is dirty', and 'black comes from lower society'. Eventually, the interpersonal relationship between the two characters is deepened and resulted on the debunking of all the stereotypes upon Russell.

Through this drama, D. Farr tries to say that stereotypes can be diminished or even vanished from someone's mind by efforts of understanding each other. The study reveals that the stereotypes can be tackled down by the efforts of the human beings from different races to understand each other. This is in line with one of the mostly emerged stereotypes about the main character (Russell). It shows that what D. Farr picture in the drama happens and experienced by Afro-American in the society, in reality. It will be better for humanity if many people who still have negative perception on the Afro-American to read literature that provides clarity on how to get the stereotypes off their minds. It may take quite long time but if many do so, our world can have better treatment upon each other and create better place to live in.

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