

RACIAL DISCRIMINATION TOWARD AFRICAN-AMERICAN IN STEVE MCQUEEN'S *12 YEARS A SLAVE*

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Abstract

The movie entitled *12 Years a Slave* movie written by John Ridley and directed by Steve McQueen is a movie about the African-American, Solomon Northup, being a slave. This movie is reflection of the real social condition in the era of 1981s such as gets an unequal treatment or discriminative attitudes through the colonizer in United States. The purpose of this study is to uncover the racial discrimination toward the character. As an African-American writer, Ridley depicted a story about an African-American freeman character enslaved in the United States for 12 years. Ridley argues that this condition gives the African- American character to get a position of being mistreated and being segregated in the society. To analyze this novel, the theory of Ali Rattansi (2007) is used to support the concept of the racial discrimination. The result of this study shows that the African-American character in *12 Years a Slave* suffers from the racial discrimination trough the mistreated by the superior and also, they are being segregated in society, and finally it leads his existence as the minority.

Keyword: African-American, Slavery, Racial Discrimination, Ali Rattansi.

1. INTRODUCTION

In this world, race can define into one of the reasons of diversity towards individual with another individual or tends to a group of people in the society. Race can be distinguished in the physical appearance, behavior, culture, way of living, or the way of their show their identity through their habitual. Furthermore, people live in the same surrounding should have an equal treatment such as the way of live that they should go along with harmony from one to another. There is no reason to have such a privilege behavior even though they have different in age, gender, sex,

jobs, ethic, or even race because every human deserve to have an equal aspect of life. Unfortunately, some people still have an idea that people, who come from different race, do not deserve the equality. In fact, the racial differences can be caused the distinction in the society. This type of inequality or imbalance behavior towards the racial differences usually identified as discrimination.

Discrimination can be categorized as a form of individual behavior or attitudes that are unequal, behavior inequality or imbalance between other individuals or one group to another group. Discrimination arises in the

society because of differences in perspective as well as the prejudice thoughts of people. Also, it also occurs because of supported by the history that still continues to be inherent until now. People who live in-between have more than one culture will experience things like discrimination, if the groups of those people are the minority in society. This proves that inequality can be seen from the community group which is divided into two as the superior and inferior. Those attitudes are supported by stereotype or being judgment to the people who is an inferior. More than that, the superior is necessary to have more power than the minority so they will get bad treatment and inequality in society.

In this case, some ideas of racial discrimination have found by the experts. Marger (2017) mention that race means the essential biological meaning of race is a population of humans classified on the basis of certain hereditary characteristics that differentiate them from another human group. He also states that skin color, religion, nationality, and even the entire human species can be identified as a race. Then, to understand well about discrimination, the theory of Theodorson and Theodorson (1979), he mention that discrimination is the unequal treatment of

individual or groups on the basis of some, usually categorical, attribute, such as race, ethnicity, gender, religion, sexual orientation, age, or social class membership, which means a detrimental distinction based on grounds that may not be attributed to the individual. Strengthening the previous statement, discrimination usually comes from the idea or thoughts of racism. According to Rattansi (2007) he states that “Racism is meant any claim of the natural superiority of one identifiable human population, group or race over another.” The previous statement means that the attitudes of superior toward the inferior are come naturally because of the identity of a human population that has a difference in race.

Then, the concept of racism is nailed by Miles (2001) that “Racism as an ideology which is produced by specific economic and social processes, such as the defense of domination, subordination and privilege.” The statement proves that racism is an the way of thinking or thoughts of the domination such as the superior that is a product of social-economic process, which means it can be happened because of the background of the social construction supported by the racial differences. Related to this study,

racial discrimination can be happened by the inferior who has racial differences, as an African- American who suffered from the slavery. According to Rattansi (2007), African-American found themselves to experience a discrimination attitude by the deliberately rigged restrictions and seniority rules, which they have to suffer from the racism that make them segregated into their jobs.

The racial discrimination not only happen in the real life but also can be visualized by the movie entitled *12 Years a Slave* by John Ridley released in 2013. John Ridley is the author of seven published novels and a playwright as well. He writes many screenplays since 1997 until now. In 2005, he produces the world premiere of his first play entitled *Ten Thousand Years*. He is also a commentator for National Public Radio and a regular contribution to *California Connected* (2002), an award-winning, news magazine, which airs throughout California on 12 Public Television stations and the host of *Movie Club* with John Ridley (2004) on AMC, a unique movie review programs with a panel of critics. He is winning the 35 awards and 43 nominations which is one of winning the award is *12 Years a Slave*. The movie is an American dramatic movie that is

depicting a story of suffering from slavery in the United States. It adopts a true story of Solomon Northup, an African-American freeman who, in 1841, was snatched off the streets of Washington, and sold. The story opens with Solomon (Chiwetel Ejiofor) already enslaved and cutting sugar cane on a plantation then have a happy ending story that he already released of suffering being slavery for 12 years. The movie won the BAFTA Award (2014) and the Academy Award (2014) for best picture as well as the Golden Globe Award (2014) for best drama.

2. DISCUSSION

In this movie, those kinds of unequal behavior, segregated, prejudice, and mistreated by the society of the African-American as a slave depicted to strengthen the issue about racial discrimination. The position of the racial discrimination issue arises in this movie is when the African-American character, named Solomon, being kidnaped with a brutal way. Even though he is a freeman African-American, in 1841, he is being forced to be a slave then employed unfairly because he is part of the African-American in the United State. This study shows how the African-American

character is being mistreated by the superior and being segregated in the society and it leads his existence as the inferior.

2.1 Being Mistreated by the Superior

The mistreating seen in this movie shows how the superior discriminate the African- American character. This movie indicates that there are treated unequal through racial differences. These differences make diversity in the way they get a job. As a person who is being a colonized in the majority of the colonizers in 1841, he gets an unequal behavior that leads him into a mistreated. His job as a slave shows that he has no rights to ask for a better treated. In addition, the colonizers have a standard of the way colonized does the job. The fact, they are more powerful than him so he cannot fight back to get the equality of human rights. If he does not do his job according to specified standards of job that is created by the colonizers, they can do violence among the employed.



According to those pictures above, the first picture at the duration 02:00, the cinematography used in this part is the long shot of framing the picture to describe the situation in this story. The picture is clear enough to describe the place that is being a main spot of the movie. The main character, also the African-American character, is described as the slave who works in a large sugarcane field. In the middle of the large sugarcane field, he is only allowed to work in a number of people. Another supported element such as the horse-drawn carriage is portrayed that him and two other people have to work with an under pressure because of doing work controlled by the colonizers. The colonizers here described as a person who is arrogant, powerful, and can dictate the inferior so that the racial

discrimination can be seen through this movie.

Then, from the second picture above at the duration 02:12, the lighting in this picture indicates that the atmosphere of the situation depicted the day is getting darker. The mistreating also proven in the way he should work with no limit of time. He is forced to continue working until the appointed time given by them. He cannot ask for his right to rest or even to breathe a moment. Injustice in the rights to work is shown on this side that the superior will employ the weak people, such as unable to fight back for their own rights, for their own benefit. Unconsciously, this form of behavior proves the form of violence through the work ethics. He is being forced to work to survive by following the rules made by them. In another words, those previous statements prove that it is a form of mistreating given by the colonizers.

The next, the third picture is using the extreme close-up shot at the duration 02.46, to catch the details object in this movie. From the picture above portrayed in this part of the movie, the food is becoming the main focus to show the existence of a mistreated by the colonizers. The previous statement states that he should work with no limit of time.

The racial discrimination in the part of being mistreated by the colonizers can be proven in the form of the food he got. Besides, after he works until the sun goes down, he just has to eat the minimal of food. Rationally, people who are being employed get proper food for them to consume. When the colonizers use his energy to work hard on a day, they must treat the person with equal treatment. But the fact said that he is treated inhumanly like he only consumes inappropriate food, which is not containing the goods for his body.

In another picture of showing the African-American character being mistreated by the colonizer is portrayed in those pictures below. It can be seen from the first and the second pictures at the duration 14:37 and 15:33 that the cinematography used to show the discrimination attitude is middle shot with low angle camera. In the technique of shooting in the movie, the object appears to be closer to focusing the characters in the frame to show some main points in doing some interactions. The position of taking pictures from the low angle camera shows that these two characters have different points of view.



In addition, taking pictures from the bottom corner indicates that the standing character has the power so that it can be called a colonizing person who has full power over the area, also considered to have a higher level. The position of looking down on him also shows that there is a form of discrimination that is obtained by characters who wear white clothes, or people who are colonized. The form of discrimination can be clearly illustrated in this picture that the colonizer is hitting the colonized

character with a sharp object. In this perspective, discrimination in terms of abuse of power results in mistreated experienced by the character. In general, those who come from anywhere with work as slaves must be treated as they should live as humans and respect each other. However, the picture above shows the dominating form of power so that slaves are treated unfairly by hurting them physically.

In the second picture at the duration 15:33, it can be seen that the colonized experience pain from the wrong form of behavior carried out by the colonizer which is severe enough to show a facial expression that when viewed from a micro-expression indicates the pain that is shown as being afraid as well as sad at the same time arise from such treatment. Expressions that are shown is indicating the existence of some hidden feelings such as fear that is shown through the eyebrows pulled up so that it wrinkles on the forehead, also marked by drooping eyes and coupled with an open mouth, which indicates that the character is not physically resisting, but as in screams that indicate that he really is helpless in front of the colonizer.

Furthermore, in the third picture at the duration 18:06, taking in terms of

the same cinematography shows the main focus in interacting.

The position of the colonized backs the camera in order to focus on the results of being mistreated by the superior. The back with the scar is the result of the previous treatment shown in the first and second pictures. In addition, the forms of physical violence experienced by these characters belong to unequal behavior. Also, other forms of unequal behavior can also be proven from the tools used to cleanse the body or can be referred to as bathing activities. The colonized is using coconut fibers to clean their body. The things like this happen in this movie, which is a representation of the United State in 1841, because the colonizer has a prejudice that the black race will always be slaves. In another word, they will not be treated equally like white people. The slavery that occurred in that year can be the main foundation that racial discrimination can occur in the black race.

Unequal behavior experienced by the character can be seen from those pictures below. In the first picture at the duration 11:30, an extreme long shot with a high angle camera. This technique of the shooting shows the object appears further away so that the main focus of this

image is the atmosphere and depiction of the surrounding environment.



The atmosphere depicted in this picture shows solitude as well as deep sadness by using lighting to only focus on objects. Then, the surroundings are given a dark tone to strengthen the atmosphere of emptiness depicted in this picture. The character depicted alone in a small room with narrow lighting focus on him. He gets a form of discrimination in terms of unequal behavior in which there is an element of physical violence. In this picture, the character is being mistreated because he experiences a form of oppression by mounting him using handcuffs on his hands and feet. In other word, this form of treatment is not humanizing humans. In general, humans

have the right to free from all forms of violence, mistreated, and the right of freedom. However, discrimination is very clearly felt when the colonized experienced not only in terms of physical force employed as slaves but also experienced in terms of its freedom to live. In the second picture, the form of taking pictures by means of extreme close-ups can be unpacked in terms of micro-expression. This facial expression can explain the fear of this form of unequal treatment also makes it clear that the character is enslaved by being handcuffed.

2.2 Being Segregated in the Society

Another form of discrimination can be seen from the picture below. It can be proven that the form of separation treatment of slavery is underlying the racial difference. In both images at the duration 2:25 and 3:46 is using cinematography of long shot to clarify the atmosphere, the objects that are highlighted, and depictions in terms of the environment. The separation obtained from the two pictures above is the location of the rest area used by slaves.



A place that should be a proper, comfortable, and safe place to rest from all their work during the day actually makes them not feel the rights they should. In that place, all the slaves were gathered together regardless of age, sex, and gender. Seen from the other side, even though their work as slaves was a form of representation during the period of slavery in 1841, they should not be separated by providing unworthy places such as not finding comfortable beds and adequate lighting to be occupied because

they can have the equal right among all the human being.

Then to strengthen the separation carried out on the basis of discrimination is also seen in terms of the bathrooms they use in the third picture at the duration 17:34. To show that the place is used as a place for them to clean themselves, there were several objects such as buckets and all the slaves there were naked. They are forced to use the place simultaneously without any obstructions. It can be described that the place can be categorized as a public and open place so it is not suitable for use as a fairly private place. Also, the most part of the side of the house is that the bathrooms are private places so that not everyone can use them together but then the portrayal of discrimination from this picture is shown very clearly when related to ordinary life. In conclusion, it can be proven that even the place that should be used for their personal needs is not given properly and properly by the colonizer.

Other forms of discrimination concerning the separation between colonized and colonizer can be seen from the clothes they wear. In the first picture at 1:12:37 duration, the technique used to describe the atmosphere in this picture is

a long shot by showing all objects in one frame.



Separation in society can be seen that colonized slaves wear shabby, dirty, and neglected clothing. This indicates that the separation in terms of clothing strengthens discrimination among society. Colonized clothing is very different from the colonizer. They use clothes that are more elegant, neat, and suitable for use as humans take care of themselves. Differences from clothing encourage different social levels so that the colonizer and colonized can be distinguished from the habits that they do. In terms of clothing, it can be seen that the difference between people who have high power looks tidier, while people who are neglected can be described as slaves or people who do not have power.



Furthermore, to strengthen the existence of discrimination from separation can be proven from the transportation that is colonized to use. In the second picture, the duration is 28.40 using the long shot technique with a high angle camera. From taking pictures like this it can be seen that some men who wear hats in this picture are identified that they are part of the colonizer whose job is to oversee the activities carried out by colonized which can be categorized as a form of discrimination. In this picture an object is seen, namely the cart as the main means of transportation used by the colonizer to deliver the colonized to the places they are going. In general, a suitable means of transportation used to transport people from one place to another is a car. However, colonized uses the cart as a sign that there is a separation of means of transportation so as to strengthen the existence of forms of discrimination from racial differences. In another word, colonized people tend to get unequal treatment as indicated by the

place of residence, clothing and transportation they use.

3. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, racial discrimination is a form of individual behavior or attitude that is unequal or imbalance between other individuals or one group to another group in terms of race differences. In this movie, it can be seen that racial discrimination can occur from a number of treatments such as mistreated by the superior including those being slaves, getting food that is not proportional to the energy they spend, also getting inappropriate treatment by being whipped and handcuffed. Those treatments can be identified as not humanizing humans as all humans have the right to life. On the other hand, racial discrimination also can be seen in terms of separation between societies. It can be seen from their residence, bathroom, clothes, and transportation that are not suitable to be used so that all of them could be included in the category of discrimination in slavery.

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