

Unveiling Racism: A Study of Discrimination in *Such a Fun Age*

Aisyah Andina Ayu Sekar Lestari¹

Universitas Pamulang¹
Email: aisyah@gmail.com¹

Abstract

The aim of this study is to portray the issue of discrimination under racism that the main character experienced as a black woman in Such a Fun Age. It is a novel that is written by Kiley Reid which published in 2019. This study focused on the portrayal of discrimination under racism through the main character's experience and the response from the main character towards the discrimination. This study conducted analysis using qualitative methods, as well as the theory of race and racism under the title "The Idiom of Race" from Michael Banton which is summarized in a theory book entitled "Theories of Race and Racism: A Reader" (2000) that was edited by John Solomos and Les Back and used by the writer in analyzing the data found. Based on the findings and analysis from the data found, the results shows that there are acts of discrimination in the form of deemed unearthly, deemed ineligible, and deemed as a criminal, which position the main character in the difficulty of living her life as a black woman. The acts of discrimination in this novel resulted that it has bothered the equality between races and differentiated other race unfairly.

Keywords: *discrimination, race, racism.*

A. Introduction

Such a Fun Age was the chosen novel as the study material in this thesis related to the issue of racism. *Such a Fun Age* was a novel by an American writer named Kiley Reid that was released at the end of 2019. This one was Reid's first novel, which became her debut as a writer and became a novel widely discussed. *Such a Fun Age* was a novel that tells a story of a 25 years old black woman, Emira Tucker, who received discrimination acts based on racism one night in a grocery store when she was taking care of Briar, a white kid, as her babysitter. She was being cornered and accused of kidnapping Briar by the security guard and a middle-aged woman who has suspicious of Emira's presence with Briar at the time. They considered that it was a non-sense situation that a black woman standing with a white kid in the middle of the night, especially when they knew that Emira wasn't Briar's mother, since they also display different skin colors which identified their race.

By raising *social* issues related to racism (the main issue), social class, and feminism, *Such a Fun Age* is labeled as "book of the year" and received the title of the New York Times Bestseller. Besides, this novel has also been longlisted for the 2020

Booker Prize. From the stated reasoning, the writer was compelled to analyze the issue of racism from the novel *Such a Fun Age* because the writer feels that this novel exposes the issue of racism in a *very* related way to past cases. Through the novel, this issue can get into the minds of many people and become an in-depth understanding of how racism still bothered the equality between races.

B. Method

This study adopts a qualitative approach, utilizing the novel "Such a Fun Age" as its primary source for analysis in essay form. The qualitative method enables systematic empirical inquiry into meaning, as outlined by Shank (2002, p. 5), facilitating organized and easily digestible language. As this study does not incorporate numerical elements or statistical data, a qualitative approach is fitting for its descriptive analysis. Data for this study are sourced from Kiley Reid's novel "Such a Fun Age," first published in 2019. The narrative revolves around Emira, a 25-year-old black woman facing racial discrimination from white individuals. The selection of "Such a Fun Age" is motivated by its exploration of racism, a central theme within the book. The data collection process commenced with a thorough reading of the novel to grasp its content comprehensively. Subsequently, key issues were identified and relevant quotations supporting these themes were extracted for analysis. Data were then categorized based on the identified themes. Data extracted from "Such a Fun Age" were primarily drawn from quotes within the book. These quotes were categorized according to the various issues highlighted in the novel, particularly those pertaining to racism. Additionally, character experiences and internal struggles were analyzed to enrich the examination of racism within the narrative. The analysis is presented in essay format, guided by theories on racism summarized in "Theories of Race and Racism: A Reader" by Les Back and John Solomos..

C. Findings and Discussion

1.The Discrimination through the Main Character's Life in *Such a Fun Age*

Discrimination based on the issue of racism is illustrated from the point of view of the main character's experience through her dialogues and thoughts, which become challenges and difficulties for her in living her life. Several form of discrimination are depicted in *Such a Fun Age* by Kiley Reid, which can be considered as adherence to racism, as follows:

1.1.Deemed Unearthly

As a black woman, Emira Tucker, one of the main characters, is subjected to unfounded accusations that lead her to be prejudiced as a criminal one night at Market

Depot. This incident left her reeling and thinking about her whole life, about her achievements at the age of 25 as a black citizen blending in with white people.

“Is this your child?”

“No.” Emira laughed. “I’m her babysitter.”

“Alright, well . . .” he said, “with all due respect, you don’t look like you’ve been babysitting tonight.” (Reid, 2019, p. 15).

The dialogue above occurs when Emira is babysitting Briar at Market Depot in the middle of the night, at the request of Alix (her boss) due to an incident at Alix's house that requires the woman to ask Emira to take Briar out for a moment. When Alix called her, Emira was at her best friend's birthday party, so she had to look after Briar in her skimpy party suit. The first form of discrimination that Emira experienced was at the moment considered unnatural when a black woman like her in feminine clothes was babysitting a small white child when it was late at night at that time. The security guard interpreted her appearance as *"a non-babysitter look"* and began by saying *"with all due respect,"* which was condescending. The guard only made a small preamble before taking an arrogant attitude towards Emira, believing that the woman was someone who deserved to be suspected.

1.2.Deemed Ineligible

Black people are often looked down upon and do not have the right to voice opinions based on their point of view. When they are involved in a case, they only become the "object" of a misconception and need to struggle hard to be able to occupy a position as a valid voice. This was also experienced by Emira Tucker when her position was cornered. “K,” *she exhaled. “I’m her babysitter, and her mom called me because —”* (Reid, 2019, p. 16). The dialogue in this section shows how Emira, a black woman, who has equal rights with other civilians, receives pressure to explain her questionable position based on the color of her skin. This is not just "questioning" in general, like a guard asking a civilian who was visiting the market with the tone of greeting. Here, the guard asked in the context of "questioning" with the underestimating tone, which makes confusion of Emira's presence. It knocks out that Emira's presence felt illegitimate. What the guard did, showed that a black woman should always carry an explanation wherever she go and that it was a natural rule.

“Hi, I’m so sorry, I just . . . hi.” From the end of the aisle, the woman came forward, and her very used tennis shoes squeaked against the tile floor. She put a hand to her chest. “I’m a mom. And I heard the little girl say that she’s not with *her* mom, and since it’s so late I got a little nervous.” (Reid, 2019, p. 16).

In the dialogue above, a middle-aged woman gives her opinion clearly and tries to validate her "opinion," that what she said is reasonable. As Banton said, that the

understanding of people in the present about the word "race" that has gone through the wrong path, will lead to the wrong path of the understanding in the future. This dialogue, shows how the middle-aged woman is continuing the "misconception" regarding the understanding of "race" that was passed on by the previous generation. She saw Emira, a black woman, with a small white child in a public place in the middle of the night, and made the assumption that the position of the existence of the two humans was very unnatural. The middle-aged woman is a mother, and was worried about the scene in front of her that shows a small white child with a black woman, which she later heard that the child was not with her mother. The assumption then led to the thought that the black woman was a criminal, who was kidnapping the little girl. This assumption comes based on the understanding that black people have great potential in committing crimes. Assumptions brought about by understanding from the present and continued without being prevented despite the many cases of discrimination against black people that have been raised through the media and slowly opened the eyes of many people. Because in essence, straightening and unifying everyone's way of thinking is a complicated and an uneasy thing.

1.3. Deemed as a Criminal

How is someone identified as a criminal? Usually, this is proven by a real crime committed by a person, then that person can be identified as a criminal. Whether there's a bloody scene, a threatening act, and anything that can be used as an evidence to qualifying someone in committing a crime and make an accusation. However, in the case of discrimination against black people experienced by Emira, identification as a criminal was imposed on her without the need for solid evidence. This is where injustice comes in.

"Hey hey hey." The man behind the cell phone tried to get Emira's attention. "Even if they ask, you don't have to show your ID. It's Pennsylvania state law." (Reid, 2019, p. 18). The Penn state tries to assert that the applicable laws of Pennsylvania are actually in favor of the rights of its citizens. Both white and black citizens, all rights held by them are equal. When the guard tried to snatch Emira's cellphone by cornering the woman, what he did had violated the law. The guard removed Emira's identity, as a black citizen, from the law. This act is categorized as racism-based discrimination against black people.

1.4. The main character respond to the discrimination she received in *Such a Fun Age*

As the main character, Emira has doubts about bringing up the incidents of discrimination she experienced in the public sphere. She didn't even tell her parents about it, because she didn't want to get criticized about her working as a babysitter. Her parents didn't know about she is working as a babysitter and typing for a living. That's why when she met the acts of discrimination, her responds are skeptical. Those responds are the following:

1.4.1. Rejection

Being in a public space in a discriminatory situation is already embarrassing and disturbing for Emira, especially if she has to bring this discrimination issue to a wider space in order to get justice. Despite being a victim of discrimination as a black woman, she does not want to be in the public spotlight. Emira did not want her name to be listed in online media and identified as a victim of discrimination. She is not much involved in social media. Emira does not have any social media accounts such as Instagram, Twitter, or Facebook. Playing in cyberspace is not the typical life she wants to live.

The Penn State man came up and into view. His cell phone was raised and recording in front of his chest.

“Ohmygod.” Emira shielded her face with chipped black nails as if she’d accidentally walked into a group photo. “Can you step off?”

“I think you’re gonna want this filmed,” he said. “Do you want me to call the police?”

Emira dropped her arm and said, “For what?” (Reid, 2019, 17).

When the local man tried to help her by recording the incident of the discrimination committed by the guard so that Emira also had evidence to bring the incident to receive justice, the woman instead asked the man to stay away. She didn't want any recordings that included the incident in it. Emira chose to think of it as a past incident, even though the incident was quite traumatizing for her. Even when the man offered to call the police, Emira questioned what was the point of calling the police. She felt as that she was not at a crime scene. The situation, to her, was just a misunderstanding that she could clear up without involving the police as if it was a crime scene with police lines, indicating that there was a criminal and a victim in critical condition.

1.4.2. Blame the Situation

When the video of her being discriminated against at Market Depot that night went viral on Twitter, which is the fastest platform in spreading news, Emira felt extremely flustered. Emira, who was not very tech-savvy, had no idea that when the video was released there, it would be free for everyone to watch. Moreover, the fact that it could be recorded by anyone once it was released. The problem is, social media is a platform that is free and difficult to control its security. Because of that, Emira never had the desire to dive into that risky virtual world.

There it all was. Black Girl Almost Gets Arrested for Babysitting. Black Girl Destroys Security Guard Who Accuses Her of Kidnapping. Just Another Black Girl Trying To Do Her Job and Getting in Trouble for It. Philadelphia Babysitter Accused of Kidnapping. #BelieveBlackWomen. #AreWeFreeToGo. Sassy Black Woman Lets Security Guard Have It. (Reid, 2019, p. 187).

The following are a series of hashtags given by the public for those who have watched the discrimination video at the Market Depot. From the hashtags given, most of the people were on Emira's side. The hashtag is a testament to the backlash of voices calling for justice against discrimination against black women. The hashtag "Black Girl Destroys Security Guard Who Accuses Her of Kidnapping" refers to Emira's courage on not to immediately obey the guard's words and maintain her position. They saluted Emira's attitude of defending her rights and turning against the guard. Meanwhile, the hashtag "Just Another Black Girl Trying To Do Her Job and Getting in Trouble for It" refers to their concern about the rampant cases of deprivation of rights for black people. They agree on how black people often get into trouble when they are making a living to support themselves in a harsh world.

1.4.3. Acceptance

Viewers and sharers of the video tacked it to their feeds with comments like, This is fucked up but I'm also dying laughing, and OMG, this girl is my hero (Reid, 2019, p. 205). From Emira's point of view, she slowly realized that the presence of the discriminated video involving her that night at Market Depot wasn't as bad as she had feared. Although there are some cons to the incident in the video, she found a glimmer of enthusiasm for black people not to be subject to accusations or other forms of discrimination as she experienced in the video. Emira realized that her figure in the video became an icon of strength for black people to dare to defend their rights. Not only that, but Emira also realized that her video gave awareness to the public's point of view without making those who watched it uncomfortable.

Someone had taken a screenshot of Emira yelling at the security guard with a hand to her hip, and they zoomed in on Briar's face looking helplessly at the camera. The caption read, **record scratch* Yep. That's me. You're probably wondering how I got in this position* (Reid, 2019, p. 205).

Briar's presence on the night of the discrimination at the Market Depot shed light on one thing. Emira saw how people used Briar's expression as a joke because it was considered adorable. The fact that Briar is still a toddler, where the things that happen in front of her can be well recorded in her head and become her mindset in living her life when she grows up, is the reason that the truth of this act of discrimination must be straightened out. The modern thoughts of racism from the present review which were covered through people's understanding, misled the thoughts of people from the next generation so that there was an act of discrimination based on racism as what Emira experienced. The presence of young children, who hear or see scenes of discrimination like that, makes it very possible that later when they grow up, the idea that "discrimination" is commonplace becomes their solid thought because it is "passed down" from the perpetrators once it reached their memory.

1.4.4. Take an action

After being hesitant to speak up about the video of her being widely circulated, Emira finally agreed to be interviewed on the TV channel hosted by Laney and Peter Chamberlain, the local program WNFT and who was also Alix's husband. For several days before she attended the talk show, Emira still believed that it was Kelley who spread the video. Until on the day of the interview, Emira finds out the truth that it was Alix who spread the video secretly through Zara, who overheard the conversation between Alix and Tamra. Emira decided to take an action, which was quite astonishing for Alix. Alix thought her actions were well hidden, and no one knew about it except her and the people who conspired with her. Emira was so disappointed when she found out that her boss did this, so she openly expressed her feelings at the event, which was broadcast LIVE.

"Oh. No no." Emira shook her head casually as if she were refusing dessert after a large meal. *"I was pretty upset, but now I'm more mad that this video got out without my permission"* (Reid, 2019, p. 220). There is a point where Alix's character here shows how straightening out acts of discrimination based on racism is not the main goal in solving the problems of each of the main characters involved. In a novel, usually, the protagonist tries to solve a problem, while the antagonist acts in the opposite direction of the protagonist's goals, which hinders solving the problem. Because here the act of discrimination experienced by Emira, the protagonist of the story, is the main point as a problem that occurs and wants to be solved, then Alix's character is described as a protagonist in general. Alix got rid of the vision of straightening out the discrimination experienced by Emira to raise awareness to the public, and instead took advantage of this as an opportunity to raise her own "name" in front of the public.

1.4.5. Get Away from Being the Object of Racism

After Emira cut ties with both Kelley and Alix, she slowly found the realization that she had been in a circle of racism. The incident of racism that she experienced did not only happen that night at the Market Depot. She has been the object of racism throughout her relationship with Alix and Kelley. *Alix took a second to pause for effect. "If you're still okay fetishizing black people like you did in high school, fine. Just don't pull that shit with my sitter."* (Reid, 2019, p. 173). The dialogue above are the explanations from Alix and Kelley's point of view on how they both violate each other that they are both demeaning on black people, and tried to make the argument about who is demeaning the most. From the point of view of Alix who knows the figure of Kelley Copeland since they were in high school, Kelley is a man who is obsessed with black people. Kelley has always been friends with black men, and since breaking up with Alix, he has almost always dated black woman when Alix peeks at Kelley's Facebook profile.

Of course you're hiring black people to raise your children and putting your family crest on them. (Reid, 2019, p. 176). Meanwhile, from Kelley's point of view, Alix's family has always been obsessed with recruiting black women as nannies in their family. Until Alix has a small family of her own, Alix continues her parents'

obsession with recruiting a black woman as a babysitter to look after her child. The history that Alix and Kelley's point of view shows about themselves makes it clear on how both were obsessed with black people for their own needs and benefits. Both what Alix and Kelley did were specific, that they were demeaning black people specifically and not on an accidental basis.

D. Conclusion

In the examination of racism within the novel "Such a Fun Age," the writer identifies three distinct forms of discrimination against black people: being deemed unearthly, ineligible, and criminal. Emira Tucker, the protagonist, experiences these discriminations firsthand. Firstly, she faces the perception that a black woman with a white child is nonsensical, rendering her presence in public spaces deemed unearthly. Secondly, she encounters situations where her right to self-defense is deprived, and her voice is invalidated, making her deemed ineligible. Lastly, she is accused of criminality without evidence, reinforcing stereotypes that black individuals cannot coexist with whites without suspicion or accusation. Emira's struggles with discrimination propel her quest for justice, revealing her awareness of pervasive negative perceptions of black people. These perceptions erode her dignity and sense of safety, prompting her to distance herself from racist environments. Emira's journey underscores the profound impact of racism on individuals' lives and their pursuit of equality.

E. Reference

- Ahmad, G. (2008). *Racism in James McBride's Miracle at St Anna*.
- Amnesty International. (n.d.). *Discrimination*. Retrieved from Amnesty International: <https://www.amnesty.org/en/what-we-do/discrimination/>
- Bell, H. (2000). *Racism and Feminism: The Issue of Accountability*. New York: Routledge.
- Christopher, I. (2020, May 30). *Racial inequality in Minneapolis is among the worst in the nation*. Retrieved from The Washington Post: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/2020/05/30/minneapolis-racial-inequality/>
- Dalton, B., Joyce, S. L., & Sarah, C. (2020, May 30). *The death of George Floyd: What video and other records show about his final minutes*. Retrieved from The Washington Post: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/nation/2020/05/30/video-timeline-george-floyd-death/>
- Devah, P., & Hana, S. (2008, January 1). *The Sociology of Discrimination: Racial Discrimination in Employment, Housing, Credit, and Consumer Markets*.

Retrieved from HHS Public Access:
<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2915460/>

Evan, H., Ainara, T., Christiaan, T., Drew, J., Haley, W., & Robin, S. (2020, May 31). *How George Floyd Was Killed in Police Custody*. Retrieved from The New York Times: <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/05/31/us/george-floyd-investigation.html>

Fatimah, Z. (2019). *Racism Towards Japanese-American in Isabelle Allende's The Japanese Lover*.

Headlee, C. (2017). *Racism vs. Discrimination: Why The Distinction Matters*. Retrieved from Celeste Headlee: <https://celesteheadlee.com/racism-vs-discrimination-why-the-distinction-matters/>

Jennifer, M. (2020, July 21). *Such a Fun Age: Book Review*. Retrieved from the Bibliofile: <https://the-bibliofile.com/such-a-fun-age/>

Klarer, M. (1998). *An Introduction to Literary Studies*. London: Routledge.

Michael, B. (2000). *The Idiom of Race: A Critique of Presentism*. New York: Routledge.

Oliver, C. C. (2000). *Race Relations: Its meaning, beginning, and progress*. New York: Routledge.

Robiah, A. A. (2015). *Racism Against African American Slave in Solomon Northup's Twelve Years as a Slave*.

Shank, G. (2002). *Qualitative Research: A Personal Skills Approach*. Upper Saddle River: Merrill Prentice Hall.

Smithsonian. (2014). *Historical Foundations of Race*. Retrieved from National Museum of African American History & Culture: <https://nmaahc.si.edu/learn/talking-about-race/topics/historical-foundations-race>

Terry, E. (1983). *Literary Theory*. Basil Blackwell.

Tzvetan, T. (2000). *Race and Racism*. New York: Routledge.

..