

Racial Discrimination in Malcolm Hansen's *They Come in All Colors*

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Abstract

This study aims to analyze the portrayal of racial discrimination and how the main character responds to it in Malcolm Hansen's novel They Come in All Colors (2018). The analysis is grounded in Pincus's (1996) theory of racial discrimination, which distinguishes between individual and institutional forms. Employing a qualitative descriptive approach, the research examines data in the form of characters' dialogues and narrative descriptions within the novel. The findings reveal that the protagonist, Huey, experiences both individual and institutional discrimination. In response, he adopts coping strategies such as self-acceptance and seeking guidance from his parents. These strategies illustrate the psychological and emotional resilience required to navigate a racially discriminatory environment.

Keywords: individual discrimination, institutional discrimination, self-acceptance, racial identity

A. Introduction

Racial discrimination remains a deeply entrenched issue in societies worldwide, with particularly profound consequences in racially diverse nations such as the United States. Although the ideal of equality is enshrined in democratic institutions, systemic inequality based on race continues to manifest in everyday life, shaping experiences in education, employment, housing, and interpersonal relationships. Literature has long served as a powerful medium for documenting and critiquing such injustices, offering nuanced explorations of racial identity, marginalization, and the struggle for social inclusion. Among contemporary works addressing these themes is *They Come in All Colors* (2018) by Malcolm Hansen, a novel that provides a compelling portrait of racial discrimination through the perspective of a biracial protagonist navigating the complex realities of racial identity and prejudice in the American South.

Race, as Abizadeh (2001) explains, is a socially constructed category used to classify human populations based on perceived physical, geographical, or ancestral traits. While often devoid of scientific merit, racial categorization has historically been used to justify hierarchies and power imbalances. Racial discrimination, consequently, refers to the unequal treatment of individuals based solely on their race or ethnicity. As Hughes and Kroehler (2010) assert, racism entails the belief in the inherent superiority of one racial group over another, and this ideology underpins discriminatory actions ranging from overt hostility to structural exclusion.

Smith (2016) further defines discrimination as the systematic denial of rights or opportunities, leading to long-term social disparities and undermining the principles of fairness and human dignity.

The theoretical foundation of this study is grounded in Pincus's (1996) framework of racial discrimination, which distinguishes three forms: individual, institutional, and structural. Individual discrimination involves overt acts of racism by individuals, while institutional discrimination refers to policies or practices within organizations that systematically disadvantage certain racial groups. Structural discrimination, the most insidious, is embedded in the norms and values of society itself, reproducing inequality without the need for overt prejudice. This tripartite model allows for a comprehensive understanding of the forms of racial discrimination depicted in literary works, including the subtle and systemic forces that shape characters' lives.

Several previous studies have explored racial discrimination in literature. For instance, Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* and Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird* have received critical attention for their portrayals of racial injustice in American society. However, existing scholarship often focuses on either historical portrayals of racism or African American experiences in predominantly Black or white communities. In contrast, Malcolm Hansen's *They Come in All Colors* centers on a biracial character caught between two racial identities, offering a unique perspective on how racial discrimination affects individuals who do not fit neatly into binary racial categories. The novel captures the psychological and social struggles of Huey Fairchild, a teenager growing up in the 1960s South, as he attempts to reconcile his identity in a world that insists on racial division.

The gap in the literature lies in the relative scarcity of analyses focused on biracial identity and the specific forms of discrimination faced by those who are simultaneously insiders and outsiders in both Black and white communities. Moreover, few studies apply Pincus's model in literary analysis to systematically categorize the types and mechanisms of racial discrimination experienced by characters. This study seeks to fill that gap by examining how racial discrimination is portrayed in *They Come in All Colors* and how the protagonist responds to it within his sociocultural context.

The objectives of this study are twofold: first, to identify and analyze the types of racial discrimination encountered by the main character using Pincus's framework, and second, to explore the strategies employed by the protagonist to confront and cope with such discrimination. By examining both the oppressive structures and the character's resistance, the study contributes to a deeper understanding of how racial identity and social justice are negotiated in literature.

Theoretically, this research contributes to the ongoing academic discourse on racial discrimination by applying a sociological framework to literary analysis. It highlights the intersections of race, identity, and power as represented in fiction, expanding the conversation to include biracial perspectives. Practically, this study aims to raise awareness about the persistence of racial bias and the lived experiences of those navigating hybrid identities. In doing so, it not only enhances literary appreciation but also fosters critical reflection on the enduring legacies of racism and the possibilities for resistance.

B. Method

This study adopts a qualitative descriptive method to analyze the depiction of racial discrimination and the protagonist's response in *They Come in All Colors* (2018) by Malcolm Hansen. Qualitative research is particularly suited for exploring complex social issues such as discrimination, as it emphasizes subjective interpretation and contextual meaning. According to Denzin and Lincoln (2000), qualitative research involves studying phenomena in their

natural settings and interpreting them through the meanings individuals assign to them. This approach allows for an in-depth exploration of the narrative, characters, and thematic concerns of the novel, particularly the lived experience of racism as constructed in literary form. The flexibility of qualitative inquiry also enables the researcher to respond to emerging insights during the analysis process.

The primary data source for this study is the novel *They Come in All Colors* by Malcolm Hansen. The novel's genre—historical fiction—provides a compelling lens through which to examine the complexities of racial identity and discrimination. The data include excerpts from both narrative descriptions and character dialogues that reveal instances of racial bias and the protagonist's strategies for navigating and resisting such experiences. All textual evidence was examined from beginning to end of the novel.

Data were collected through a systematic close reading of the novel. The process began with selecting the novel as the research object. The researcher then conducted multiple readings to identify key passages addressing racial discrimination. These passages were highlighted, annotated, and classified according to emerging patterns. Particular attention was given to scenes depicting individual, institutional, and structural discrimination, aligning with the analytical framework.

The analysis was conducted using Pincus's (1996) theoretical model, which categorizes racial discrimination into three forms: individual, institutional, and structural. Identified excerpts were categorized according to these types and then interpreted in terms of how the protagonist experiences and responds to each. This framework facilitated a comprehensive understanding of how racial discrimination is constructed in the novel and its impact on character development and narrative progression.

C. Findings and discussion

They Come in All Colors is a novel by Malcolm Hansen, this novel tells the story of a biracial teenager who moves from Akersburg to the big city. In 1968 fourteen years old Huey Fairchild attended New York City's most prestigious boys' school. He and his mother had uprooted their family from their small hometown of Akersburg, Georgia, several years earlier, leaving behind Huey's white father and the racial unrest that raged deeper than the Chattahoochee River. Even though Huey is at a prestigious school, his skin being different from his friends does not rule out the possibility of being treated with racism at that school. Huey recalls the memories he experienced in his hometown during the Civil Rights Movement—and the chilling moments leading up to his and his mother's flight north.

This section examines the depiction of racial discrimination in Malcolm Hansen's novel *They Come in All Colors*. The story astutely examines the intricate and entrenched reality of racial bias through the figure of Huey Fairchild, a biracial teenager maneuvering between two racial identities. His move from infancy in Akersburg, Georgia a Southern town steeped in the geopolitical turmoil of the Civil Rights era to Claremont Prep, an elite preparatory institution in New York City, reveals his encounters with diverse manifestations of racism, both overt and insidious. These sensations are influenced by factors such as skin color, socioeconomic level, and a sense of belonging. The novel's dual temporal format underscores the enduring nature of racial prejudice across many social and historical contexts, while simultaneously illustrating how the repression of identity and the obscuration of racial ancestry exacerbate Huey's internal turmoil. The novel powerfully reflects on the impact of racial discrimination on individual identity and social inclusion in contemporary American culture through the portrayal of

systematic injustice, privilege-masked microaggressions, and the protagonist's internalized self-denial.

1. Individual Discrimination

Individual discrimination refers to the unfair treatment or prejudiced actions directed towards a person based on characteristics such as race, gender, age, religion, or sexual orientation. This type of discrimination occurs when an individual, whether consciously or unconsciously, acts in a biased manner, disadvantaging someone else in various aspects of life such as employment, education, or access to services. Unlike systemic discrimination, which involves broader societal or institutional biases, individual discrimination is typically more personal and direct, often manifesting in day-to-day interactions and decisions. From the description of individual discrimination above, the writer has found related data in the novel *They Come in All Colors*.

“When I explained that I had been awarded the honors of a student of outstanding scholarly accomplishment by the New York City Housing Authority, he looked at me like I was joking”. (Hansen, 2019, p. 9)

From the quotation above, Huey informs Zukowski that he is the award recipient. On the other hand, Zukowski listens to him with a disdainful attitude that indicates he does not trust what Huey is saying by not paying attention. The facial gestures and reactions of Zukowski make it quite clear that white people do not maintain the belief that black people are intelligent enough to be rewarded. The quotation contains evidence of individual discrimination in the form of a sort of violence in which white individuals hurt black people through their actions (Pincus, 1996). This discriminatory behavior towards black individuals undermines their peace and can perpetuate a stereotype that black people are inherently inferior and unintelligent.

“Mister McGovern looked confused as he puzzled over those words. I could tell that he felt uncomfortable talking about the fact that most people don’t think I look like I’m colored.” (Hansen, 2019, p. 14)

From the quotation above, Mr. McGovern treats Huey, who is of mixed race, as if he were a white person. He does this by observing how people perceive and interact with him. Environmental stigma is a situation in which people who are not white, particularly people of colour, are occasionally subjected to harassment and prejudice. The actions of Mister McGovern are an example of environmental stigma. On the other hand, Huey is not subjected to such treatment because of the presumption that he is white. This treatment can be classified as a form of individual discrimination because it is in line with Pincus' principle which states that individual discrimination will give rise to feelings of insecurity and threats to individuals from certain minority groups regarding race/ethnicity/groups carried out by irresponsible parties (Pincus, 1996).

“I passed the janitor on my way out. Clyde was a bowlegged colored man who’d introduced himself to me on the very first day of school. At the time, I just figured Mister McGovern had given him a heads-up about me or something. That sort of thing seemed to be happening all the time since I’d started at Claremont.” (Hansen, 2019, p. 18)

In the quotation above, Mr. McGovern acquaints Huey with Clyde, an individual of the same racial origin, in order to provide Huey with a sense of ease and companionship by having someone who shares a similar cultural heritage. Mister McGovern's treatment of Huey is a stigma against Huey, who has a minority race and will always be bullied and other immoral things by the majority. This situation can be categorized as a classified of individual discrimination, as it aligns with Pincus' principle that states that individual discrimination leads to feelings of insecurity and threats towards individuals belonging to specific minority groups based on their race, ethnicity, or other group affiliations, perpetrated by irresponsible individuals (Pincus, 1996).

“I tossed a handful of popcorn toward the field, then sat back down and explained to Suzie that Chacón was from Puerto Rico, which is why he wasn’t able to call off Thomas in English. She asked if that was where my family was from. I’m from Georgia, I answered, half expecting some stupid joke about the South. She gave me a surprised look. Oh. So—you’re American?” (Hansen, 2019, p. 13)

Suzie did not believe it because Huey's skin color did not represent an American in general. Therefore, she shows prejudice against Huey even though he is an American. As a result, individual discrimination occurs in the quote, ‘*So—you’re American?*’ to describe her distrust toward Huey, along with her surprised look (Pincus, 1996).

“The little prick shoved the hot dog in his mouth and sat back to watch the game. Suzie did a double take: first to Zukowski, then to me, then back at Zukowski. Whaddya mean? Ouch! Hey! That was my foot, Huey! Whadja do that for? Then, to Suzie: Whaddya mean, “Whaddya mean”? You mean he’s not—? What? I dunno. No. He’s colored..” (Hansen, 2019, p. 13)

According to the quotation above, Suzie and Zukowski had a discussion over Huey's skin colour, during which Suzie describes black people based on specific characteristics regarding their appearance. It comes as a surprise to Suzie that Huey is speaking to Zukowski in such a manner since she views him as a member of a minority group and has a negative impression of him. Because of this evidence of individual prejudice, it can be deduced that Suzie considers Huey to be beneath her due to the fact that he is of a different race than she is. Pincus's explanation of individual discrimination, which refers to specific racial or ethnic groups that are targeted through individual behaviors, is consistent with her pessimistic presumptions (Pincus, 1996). Suzie's anxiety and irritation are the root cause of this problem, which ultimately leads to her having personal prejudice.

“What kind of shoe was it? Hell if I know. But apparently the sheriff’s wondering if Stanley ain’t been letting coloreds in after hours for a small fee. You’re kidding. Do I look like I’m playing a practical joke?” (Hansen, 2019, p. 24)

Based on the preceding quote, during the conversation that takes place between Huey's mother and Miss Della, the topic of the swimming pool event is discussed. The sheriff is allegedly spreading allegations about black children having discounted admission to the swimming facility, according to Miss Della, who brought this information to her attention. Stanley is subjected to unjust treatment as a result of the sheriff's decision to falsely charge him

owing to his race or suspected bias. This incident is an example of individual discrimination (Pincus, 1996). Rather than being based on preconceptions that are institutional or structural in nature, this sort of discrimination is centered on the actions of individuals.

“It’s not that I’m ashamed of where I’m from or anything like that, but I could only take so much of Bilmore and Hamilton busting my balls about the way I talked. So when they kept up their My Fair Lady routine all the way through Halloween—The rain in Spain stays mainly in the plain—I started to feel that maybe I ought to just throw in the towel and hop on a Greyhound back home to Dad’s. (Hansen, 2019, p. 34)”

From the quotation above, at his new school from Bilmore and Hamilton, Huey is regularly bullied because of his distinctive manner of speech, which distinguishes him from the other students. This is because Huey is different from the other children. It is possible to classify the maltreatment of Huey by Bilmore and Hamilton as an instance of individual discrimination because of the bullying behaviour that they displayed towards him, which was based on the distinctive manner in which he utilized his voice. The unfair treatment or demeaning of an individual or group on the basis of personal characteristics such as speech, race, religion, or other features is an example of individual discrimination (Pincus, 1996). Within the context of this particular scenario, Bilmore and Hamilton consider Huey's distinctive mode of communication to be "inferior," which justifies their treatment of him in a poor manner. Their behavior demonstrates personal predispositions and prejudgments against someone different from them, serving as a distinct illustration of individual discrimination.

“Then the very next paragraph said something about Mister Abrams running an integrated pool by virtue of permitting coloreds entry after hours for a small fee.” (Hansen, 2019, p. 57)

From the quotation above, it is stated in the article that Huey is presently reading in the newspaper that Mister Abrams operates an inclusive swimming pool that allows people of colour to enter outside of the typical hours of operation for a nominal cost. There is a false complaint that has been made against Mr. Abrams, which states that he offered discounted admission to individuals of African heritage who were visiting the swimming facility. Due to the fact that Mr. Abrams only permits those of African origin to use the pool at non-standard hours, the quote serves as an illustration of the notion of individual discrimination. In addition to that, he charges a price in order to produce an experience that is unequal and separates people only on the basis of their race. It illustrates the unjust treatment of individuals based on personal bias, hence highlighting a manifestation of individual discrimination (Pincus, 1996).

“But they were hollering—gathered around yelling and taunting and shouting. Throwing bottles and whatnot. Broken glass everywhere. All that terrible language. Terrible, just terrible. And taunting and throwing things and spitting and what all. I don’t trust them people, Pea.” (Hansen, 2019, p. 80)

D. Conclusion

This study has examined the depiction of racial discrimination and the ways in which it is navigated by the protagonist in Malcolm Hansen's *They Come in All Colors*. Through a qualitative analysis grounded in Pincus's (1996) theory of discrimination, the novel reveals

two dominant forms of racial bias: individual and institutional. The protagonist, Huey, encounters personal rejection and prejudice due to his biracial identity, as well as systemic exclusion in social spaces that privilege whiteness and deny access to people of color. These experiences reflect the persistent and multifaceted nature of racial discrimination in American society, even in its supposedly progressive settings.

Importantly, the study highlights two strategies Huey employs to cope with these challenges. First is self-acceptance—instilled by his family, this internal strength enables him to maintain his dignity despite external invalidation. Second is the guidance of his parents, who advocate for adaptive resilience rather than constant resistance. These coping mechanisms offer insight into how individuals from marginalized racial backgrounds navigate a world that often devalues their identity.

The findings underscore the significance of literature in shedding light on racial injustice and the personal dimensions of survival and resistance. However, the scope of this study is limited to a single text and perspective. Future research may consider comparative analyses across multiple novels or explore how racial discrimination intersects with other identities such as gender or class. Ultimately, this study contributes to ongoing conversations about race and representation in literature, emphasizing the power of narrative to both expose societal flaws and offer pathways toward empathy and understanding.

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