

RACIAL DISCRIMINATION REFLECTED IN “THE HELP” MOVIE: A SOCIOLOGICAL APPROACH

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Abstrak

Latar belakang dari penelitian ini adalah diskriminasi rasial yang masih hangat diperbincangkan di abad ke-21 yang terekam dalam film Amerika. Dalam film ini terdapat unsur diskriminasi rasial yang dilakukan oleh orang kulit hitam kepada orang kulit putih yang sangat kental. Oleh karena itu penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengidentifikasi apa saja indikator diskriminasi rasial yang dialami oleh pembantu berkulit hitam dalam film *The Help*. Penelitian ini menggunakan metode kualitatif deskriptif dan menggunakan pendekatan sosiologi. Hasil dari penelitian ini adalah peneliti menemukan indikator diskriminasi rasial dalam film *The Help* secara konseptual, yaitu diskriminasi langsung dan diskriminasi tidak langsung. Pada diskriminasi langsung misalnya, gaji yang tidak adil, pemecatan sewenang-wenang dan ketika seorang pembantu berkulit hitam dilarang menggunakan toilet di dalam rumah majikannya. Kemudian contoh diskriminasi tidak langsung adalah mereka dipisahkan dari orang kulit putih di transportasi umum (bus) karena mereka duduk di barisan belakang, berbeda dengan penumpang kulit putih yang semuanya duduk di depan. Kemudian, perbedaan alat makan antara pembantu kulit hitam dan majikan kulit putih. Contoh diskriminasi langsung yang terakhir dalam film ini adalah perbedaan tempat ibadah untuk orang kulit hitam dan orang kulit putih.

Kata kunci: film, diskriminasi rasial, sosiologis

Abstract

The background of this research is that racial discrimination is still being discussed in the 21st century which is captured in American films. In this movie, there is an element of racial discrimination that is carried out by black people to white people which is very thick. Therefore this research aims to identify what are the indicators of racial discrimination experienced by black maids in *The Help* movie. This research used descriptive qualitative methods and using a sociological approach. The result of this study is researchers found indicators of racial discrimination in *The Help* movie conceptually, namely direct discrimination and indirect discrimination. On direct discrimination, for example, unfair salary, arbitrary dismissal and when a black maid is prevented from using the toilet inside her employer's house. Then an example of indirect discrimination are they were separated from the whites on public transportation (buses) because they sat in the back row, as opposed to the white passengers who were all seated in the front. Then, disparity in cutlery between a black maid and a white employer. The last example of direct discrimination in this film is the difference between places of worship for black people and white people

Keywords: movie, racial discrimination, sociological

1. INTRODUCTION

Discrimination is differentiating treatment from one another (Fulthoni, Arianingtyas, R., Aminah, S., 2009). Differences in treatment can be caused by differences in skin color, class, or ethnicity, as well as differences in sex, economic status, faith and so on. Discrimination is usually used to show the difference between two things. Social problems, namely racial discrimination problems that are often experienced by minority groups in a country still occur today. White people always think that their group is the best race compared to other races.

The social problem that still plagues American society is the problem of racial discrimination that is often experienced by minority groups. Since the 1950s, African Americans have sought equality and freedom, and a plethora of black movements have emerged. (HOU Xia, 2019). Throughout the storyline of *The Help* movie, these black maids are often treated by their (white female) employers with degrading judgment and treatment (Kunsey, 2018). *The Help* movie takes the setting of the 1960s, at which time the issue of black civil rights equality became a highly debated issue, especially in the United States. *The Help* movie tells a portrait of the lives of black African Americans who work as domestic servants and have lower degrees than whites.

The emancipation or equal rights of black people seems to be an issue that is interesting enough for film producers in the United States to become a theme in the films they raise, for example Tate Taylor who created *The Help* movie. *The Help* is a movie which is based on the novel of the same title by Kathryn Stockett in 2009, tells the story of the bitterness of racial discrimination in America. There are many movie that tell the life journey of blacks fighting for their lives from various forms of discrimination and racialization of whites, such as 12 years a slave, *Selma*, and *Ali*. *The Help* is a movie that raises the issue of slavery experienced by black people in America. This movie represents racial minorities, or in this context blacks are positioned or are subordinate. Blacks are servants of whites. It has even become part of American history that there is a problem of racism that leads to racial exploitation made by the majority race, in this case white people (Handayani, 2020). The phenomena of oppression is inextricably tied to the phenomenon of privilege. Racism not only disadvantages minority racial groups in society, but it also results in favoured groups (such as whites) gaining societal power (Gill & Kalra, 2020).

The Help movie premiered in Beverly Hills on August 9, 2011. The plot revolves around her friendship with two black servants, Aibileen Clark and Minny Jackson. This film take place during the Civil Rights Movement in 1963 Jackson, Mississippi. The story in *The Help* movie

tells the relationship of life between whites and blacks. This film begins with Aibileen's statement as a black maid who works at the house of Elizabeth Leefolt who is a white woman. Aibileen talked about her experience while working to care for Elizabeth's two year old child, but she was often asked to take care of the house. Besides Aibileen, one of the maids highlighted was Aibileen's best friend, Minny Jackson. Minny works for Mrs Walters and her daughter, Hilly Holbrook. Hilly is told as a cruel mother and employer. She often treats her maids arbitrarily, Hilly's actions are an act of racial discrimination and are very visible. Even though Hilly is a manipulative woman, Hilly is entrusted with leading a group of women's socialites. Hilly insisted that black maids should not use the same bathroom as their employers, employers should make a special bathroom just like what Hilly did.

Skeeter is a beautiful writer who is not married because she wants to achieve high ideals. Skeeter originally wrote a novel with the title Mississippi because Skeeter's mother, Charlotte, told her that Constantine (the maid who also looked after Skeeter as a child) stopped working, but Skeeter doesn't believe her and decides to write a book of interviews with the maids to explain their experiences. After briefly refusing, Aibileen finally agrees to be interviewed by Skeeter. After the shooting incident, many of the maids then wanted to share their stories for Skeeter to write about. *The Help* was published and read widely by Jackson's black and white community.

The Help movie depicts not only the good relationship between the maid and Skeeter, but also the employer's discriminatory behavior towards the maid. The researcher uses the interconnectedness of life between individuals as a phenomenon that will be discussed in *The Help* movie. This is because researchers want to know what types of racial discrimination are shown in *The Help* movie. The writer is interested in analyzing *The Help* movie for that reason. This film is interesting to watch because it tells the story of how Eugenia "Skeeter" Phelan struggles to face challenges when writing a novel to fight for the rights of maids (black women).

Therefore, the reason why the researcher chose *The Help* movie and did the analysis. Based on the illustration above, the researcher is interested in analyzing *The Help* movie using a sociological perspective. The reason for using a sociological perspective is because sociological theory focuses on the analysis of how society influences individual behavior and how individuals influence society. Therefore the researcher wants to analyze the research entitled "Racial Discrimination Reflected in *The Help* Movie: Sociological Approach".

The term sociology was first put forward by a French philosopher named Auguste Comte in 1839. Therefore, Auguste Comte is known as the Father of World Sociology. He

argues that, sociology is a social science that studies every social life. Sociological theory focuses on the analysis of how society influences a person's behavior and how a person influences society. The object of study from sociology is none other than human life. The word sociology comes from the Greek, which consists of the word 'socius' which means society, and 'logos' which means science. According to Siswanto (2013) in general, Sociology can be defined as the objective study of humans and societies, including the social processes that occur within them. Sociology has a reciprocal relationship between individuals and society that can affect behavior in society. The idea and the cultural setting in which the idea appears determines a literary work. According to Wellek, R & Warren (2016) said that the literary forms provided become the determinant of the success of social attitude in improving a literary work.

In principle, sociology does study human real life as a collectivity. However, in it there are many different and even contradictory theories and ways of life (Faruk, 2012). The sociological approach has the concept of life as a theory for basic principles. The theory put forward by Swingwood in (Salsabila & Thoyibi, 2022) which states into three major principle of literature as follows: literary works as the social documents, literary works as reflection of social situation of the writer, literary work as the manifestation of the historical moment.

In a research conducted by Hartatik (2013) analyzed films based on their structural elements besides that researchers have also analyzed films based on a feminist approach. Researchers used library research methods. The conclusion of this study shows that Tate Taylor wants to convey the message that black women have the same rights as white women. Then she added that the theme of *The Help* movie is "the reality of being black woman is hard to experience". Then in her research, Hou Xia (2019) revealed that Black women in the United States have historically faced racial discrimination from white people as well as gender discrimination within black patriarchal society. If black women wish to gain rights and liberties in the crack, they must address both.

Another relevant research has been conducted by Maretstiana (2014) have identified interpersonal relationships that occur in *White American Woman* and *Black African Maid*. The author uses the literature study method in this study. The results of this study indicate that the interpersonal relationship between white American woman and black African maid is seen in Skeeter and Aibileen where they work together to fight for the truth. They work together to complete the project, with assistance from Minny Jackson and other blacks.

Another previous research that is relevant to the movie "*The Help*" by Tate Taylor is a study conducted by (Cahyaningrum, 2020). She investigated the racial inequality shown in the *The Help* movie. This article also demonstrates that social class and racial identification might

be discriminatory factors. Discrimination depicted in this film is categorized as racial discrimination. They must deal with discrimination from people of a certain class and state regulations. A regulation imposed by the government has a substantial impact on encouraging discrimination. The government's policies will be observed and enforced by citizens, including whites and blacks.

The studies above were conducted by several researchers with different approaches to each other about how lifestyle affects the environment and changes the way humans behave, especially in *The Help* movie. The novelty that researchers found was a focus on the use of sociological theory from Alan Swingewood in analyzing the types of racial discrimination in this movie that were influenced by economic levels and racial differences.

In the end, researchers decided to take *The Help*, a 2011 American historical drama movie and use the sociological approach of Alan Swingewood's theory to see a phenomenon that occurs in society. Researchers were drawn to this movie because it was based on a real-life incident in which black people were viewed as inferior to white people. In this regard, the problem of this research is focused on indicators of racial discrimination and how racial discrimination is illustrated in *The Help* movie.

2. METHOD

This research was conducted by researchers using descriptive qualitative research methods. Mukhtar (2013) argue that qualitative descriptive research methods are a method used by researchers to theory related to research. Content analysis and topic analysis are the most commonly utilized data analysis techniques because they are thought to be the most ideal for qualitative descriptive design Yin, 2011 in (Suardi, Nusantara, Uninus, & Nusantara, 2018). This research will describe and understand the existence of events in society that are considered included in social deviations with a qualitative descriptive approach.

The material object used in this research is *The Help* movie. Then for the formal object, the author tries to analyze acts of racial discrimination committed by white women (employers). Text or dialogue, images and character behavior contained in *The Help* movie are the source of data for this research. The secondary data used is data obtained from the literature that has been collected to support primary data such as journal data, online articles, and others that are still related to the research being studied. Document analysis techniques are used in this study. A type of qualitative research in which the researcher identifies documents is known as document analysis for interpretation of the subject of evaluation (bowen, 2011).

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Findings in this study, researchers found several indicators of racial discrimination found in *The Help* movie (2011). According to Liliweri in Rambe (2021) discrimination is generally divided into two types, there are direct and indirect discrimination.

3.1 Direct Discrimination

Direct discrimination happens when an individual or group of individuals is treated unfairly or differently because of particular qualities such as gender, color, or religion. For example like when Hilly issued a policy to separate toilets for white people and toilets for black people. Hilly Holbrook is a white woman from the socialite group. She was a woman who was very racist and cruel to her own maids and other black people. To protect her family's health, Hilly required that every white household have a separate toilet for black maids, which was approved by the white council. Black people are considered to have a level below white people, this is explained in the image below:

"Hilly: 'if Aibileen uses the guest bathroom I'm sure she uses yours too.'"

"Lefort: 'Impossible'"

"Hilly: 'Wouldn't you rather they do it outside the house'"

"Hilly: 'Tells Raleigh every penny he spends on black bathrooms he'll get back when he y'all are done, it's dangerous because they carry different diseases than we do.'"

"Hilly: 'That's why I wrote the "home health sanitation initiative" report. A disease prevention bill requiring every white household to have a separate toilet from black maids has been backed by white councilors.'"

"Skeeter: 'Maybe we should build a bathroom outside for you, Hilly.'"

"Hilly: 'You can't joke about the state of the colored skin, I will do anything to protect our child.'"

(The Help, 00:15:20 – 00:16:18)

From the conversation above, according to the researcher, it can be concluded that this action includes direct discrimination. White skin is filled with power, luxury and pleasure, while black skin is positioned as a group who are enslaved as domestic servants, and are faced with various pressures. Hilly Holbrook is a white woman from the socialite group. She was a woman who was very racist and cruel to her own maids and other black people. She issued a policy to separate toilets for white people and toilets for black people.

To protect her family's health, Hilly required that every white household have a separate toilet for black maids, which was approved by the white council. One day, there was a heavy rain that caused many victims. Minny (Hilly's maid) suddenly had the urge to urinate but at that time she was unable to go to her own toilet which was outside the house because it was very

dangerous. Then Minny was forced to pee in Hilly's bathroom, even though previously Minny had forbidden it. In *The Help* movie (2011), the lifestyle of the character "Hilly" is quite reflective of a very racist woman. This can be seen through the incident experienced by Minny (Hilly's maid) below:

“Minny: ‘Nona hilly!!’”
“Hilly: ‘HmMMMMM’”
“Milly Walters: ‘Minny, go and use the bathroom inside, that's fine’”
“Milly: ‘Oh because of the roar? it was just a little rain he was able to go upstairs and get an umbrella from William's work.’”
“Minny: ‘Yes mom, i'll get some tea for you (but minny ventured to go to hilly's bathroom).’”
“Hilly: ‘Minny?’”
“Hilly: ‘Minny are you in there?’”
“Minny: ‘Yes mom’”
“Hilly: ‘What are you doing minny? get out of my toilet!’”
“Hilly: you're fast mini Jackson!’”
“Hilly: go away!’”
(The Help, 00:31.29 – 00:33.12)

The above conversation shows that Minny experienced arbitrary dismissal. Hilly should not have fired Minny just for using her bathroom. She was forced to use her employer's bathroom because outside the house there was a storm that caused casualties, so it was very dangerous if Minny forced to go to the bathroom outside the house. Minny departed the house frustrated and dejected as a result of the dismissing mentioned above. This dismissal also necessitates Minny deciding on their children's schools and sending them to work to help the family economy. Minny was also frequently treated brutally by her husband, who believed Minny was no longer able to help the family.

In *The Help* movie, the audience can clearly see the difference in social class between black women (maids) and white women (employers). Employers often use harsh sentences when talking to their maids which often makes the maids feel hurt. Besides using harsh words and sentences, they also often belittle black women with subtle words like "isn't it nice to have your own toilet, Aibeelen?" The sentence sounds polite but actually discriminates. Employers are too cruel to treat maids. Apart from the word, the employers also have arbitrary behavior. For example, a maid's income is disproportionate to her work. As Aibileen said at the beginning of the film:

“Aibelline: ‘I work for the Lefort family from 08.00 am to 04.00 pm, work 6 days a week’”
“Aibileen: I make 95 cents an hour totaling 182 dollars a month.’”

*“Aibileen: I do everything cooking, cleaning, washing,
ironing and shopping, but
mostly I take care of little girls.”*

(The Help, 00:03:6 – 00:03:23)

From Aibileen's statement above the researcher thinks it concluded in unfair salary. It can be seen how the use of lack women's power by white people in serving their group as a whole. The labor they expend to help white people is not commensurate with the income they get. Therefore Skeeter wants to help dismantle racial discrimination perpetrated by her friends against their maids.

3.2 Indirect Discrimination

Indirect discrimination happens when an individual or group of individuals is treated unfairly or differently because of particular qualities. As experienced by Aibileen and Henry on the bus depicted in *The Help* movie. Discrimination happened on the bus, as Aibileen and Henry experienced, as was depicted in *The Help* movie. They were separated from whites on public transportation (buses) because they sat in the back row, as opposed to white passengers who were all seated in the front. Whites and blacks started to differentiate one another based on where they were seated. The disparity in seating arrangements can also be interpreted as a sign of social class, with white people always given preference by sitting in front and black people by their backs. Black persons were shot on the night. When Aibileen and Henry still hadn't arrived at their destination, the bus driver requested them to exit out of concern that someone may get hurt on the bus as shown in the dialogue below:

“Henry: ‘What happened there sir?’”

“Driver: ‘Blacks have to get off the bus now, others tell me where you guys are going. I'll deliver as close as possible’”

“Henry: ‘What happened?’” “Driver: ‘I don't know, a Negro was shot.’”

(The Help, 01.21.04 - 01.21.28)

From the conversation above, according to the researcher, it can be concluded that this action includes direct discrimination. Such rules made black people feel disrespected. They always live with anxiety that always appears whenever and wherever. Then the thing that will be discussed is the difference between places of worship for black people and white people. There are several scenes in the film that show a church filled with only black people, not a single white person in there. It can be seen through the picture:

“Minny: ‘You cooking food, you taste it with a different spoon. If they see you put the tasting spoon back in the pot, might as well throw it all out. Spoon too. And use

the same cup, same fork, same plate every day and you put it up in the cabinet. You tell that white woman that's where you are gonna keep it from now on out. Don't do it and see what happened.'"

"Minny: 'Morning ladies, when you are sewing white folks coffee, set it down in from of them. Don't hand it to them, cause your hands can't touch and don't hit on their children white folks like to do they own spanking.'"

"Minny: 'And last thing, come here. Look at me. No sass mouthing, I mean it.'"

(The Help, 47.55-48.42)

From the dialog above can explain that there are many rules that must be obeyed by black maids. Minny got fired for using the same toilet as her employer. Therefore Minny's child had to stop going to school and replace his mother to work. Then the thing that will be discussed is the difference between places of worship for black people and white people. There are several scenes in the film that show a church filled with only black people, not a single white person to be seen. This is explained in the image below:



Picture 1. Segregation of churches for black citizens (*The Help*, 02:09:24)

From the picture above, the audience could clearly see that the people in the church were all black, no one was white. The film doesn't explain why this happened, but according to the researcher, this is one of the rules included in indirect discrimination.

3.3 Discussion

In this study, researchers found two types of discrimination, namely direct and direct discrimination. Direct discrimination is the act of limiting a particular region, such as communities, occupations, or public services and it also occurs when decision makers are influenced by prejudices against specific populations (Fajariani, 2018). In the life of the individuals of Jackson, Mississippi, United States, black people are still regarded second class citizens (Cincotta, 2004). As a result, black people face discrimination and are marginalized as members of the global community. This cannot be isolated from the Jim Crow Law, which established segregation of blacks and whites. Pronunciation of the words *nigra*, *nigger* or

colored off dominates in several scenes. Many words or acts of discrimination occur in *The Help* movie. Another point worth to note is Skeeter's desire, as a white citizen, to assist black people in achieving freedom by publishing a book that contains violence experienced by black people. According to Lever in Arni (2017) the resistance by Skeeter and the black maid is an act of aggression. The public was made aware of the oppression that black slaves had faced in the city of Jackson thanks to Skeeter's first efforts and the assistance of black servants. It's amazing to see how *The Help* movie depicts the existence of white people who fight for the rights of the helps and encourage them to realize their full potential.

The next discussion is indirect discrimination. Indirect discrimination occurs when rules prohibit some races/ethnicities from freely mingling with other racial/ethnic groups, resulting in losses for particular groups of people (Fajariani, 2018). The societal problem that still affects American society is racial prejudice, which is frequently encountered by minority groups in that country (Dalimunthe, Saputra, Spencer, & Jackson, 2021). White people had the privilege of making whatever rules they wanted. The purpose of discussing racial discrimination in this movie is to identify the different forms of racism that are depicted there. The ideological function of making this film is to represent the political, economic and cultural situation (including skin color) in the

United States in the 1960s. When there is a dominant group of subordinate groups, and the understanding of the dominant group will be partial and detrimental (West, Richard, 2008).

Our research reveals several instances of racial discrimination. The author discovered instances of racial discrimination against black domestic workers, who were forbidden from using the same silverware as white employers and whose wages did not correspond to the amount of labor they completed. Then there are the requirements that Black people must follow under Mississippi law. Considering the fact that *The Help* movie is set in the city of Jackson, Mississippi, but racist behaviors occur all around the world. As a result, this research is predicted to broaden the horizons of this film audience, allowing them to better comprehend distinctions and deal with variations in race and class.

4. CLOSING

There are several points that will be the conclusion of this research. The title of this research is racial discrimination reflected in *The Help* movie (2011). Furthermore, the main issue of this novel is about racial discrimination against black women in Jackson, Mississippi, America in 1960. The researcher uses a sociological perspective to identify racial discrimination that occurs in this film. Researchers make conclusions based on the findings described in the

previous chapter. In this study, researchers identified two types of racial discrimination in *The Help* movie: direct discrimination and indirect discrimination. On direct discrimination, for example, unfair salary, arbitrary dismissal and when a black maid is prevented from using the toilet inside her employer's house.

Then an example of indirect discrimination are they were separated from the whites on public transportation (buses) because they sat in the back row, as opposed to the white passengers who were all seated in the front. Then, disparity in cutlery between a black maid and a white employer. The last example of direct discrimination in this film is the difference between places of worship for black people and white people. This discrimination is done intentionally and clearly mentions certain characteristics such as skin color. The indicators are classified using Liliweri's opinion. In *The Help* movie shows white and black identities. Whites are positioned as the majority group that has the power to place restrictions on blacks in various public spheres. The power relations that belong to white people in this case further legitimize discrimination or partitions built by whites against blacks. After analyzing and discussing the problems that exist in *The Help* movie in the previous chapter, Based on all of the findings and conversations, the researcher decided that the data that was collected and classified is related to some existing theory and examined utilizing descriptive qualitative data.

The researcher uses a sociological perspective to identify racial discrimination that occurs in *The Help* movie. When someone or a group of people are treated differently because of their race, it is referred to as racial discrimination. This is because they believe that other races are considered as less valuable than their own. This discriminatory practice may be formalized by racial segregation rules, although it is frequently carried out without legal sanction. The movie depicts the fight for equal rights for black maids in the United States in the early 1960s. These black maids experienced a variety of forms of discrimination and unfair treatment, including racial segregation, limitations on their civil and political rights, and discriminatory treatment of black people. There are scene in this movie that depict the fight for civil rights, including when black domestic workers decide to testify about the treatment they experienced from their employers.

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