

Racism in Nella Larsen's "Passing"

Rasisme di Novel Nella Larsen "Passing"

Siti Fitriani¹, Refina Wati², Rif'ah Inayati³

^{1,2,3}English Study Program, Faculty of Social Science and Culture, Universitas
Trunojoyo Madura

afifi9074@gmail.com, revinawati04@gmail.com, rifah.inayati@gmail.com

Article Information

ABSTRACT

History

Accept: 13
November 2024
Revised: 13
December 2024
Approved: 1
January 2025

Kata Kunci

Rasisme

Keywords

racism

This study purposes to analyze the types of racism level and the effect of the racism level that portray in the characters in novel of Passing by Nella Larsen using racism as a theoretical approach. This study conducted using qualitative approach. The data were collected by close reading of the character's utterances or the narrator's text in the novel "Passing". There are 11 data of racism level that classified based on Jones's theory (2013) into three types: individual bias, institutional bias and cultural bias. The result showed that the utterances were categorized as individual bias are 10 data, one data as institutional bias and cultural bias does not find in this novel. The effect of racism level such as discomfort in community, always be careful and try to fulfill other groups prejudice to them.

Abstrak

Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menganalisis jenis-jenis tingkat rasisme dan pengaruh tingkat rasisme yang digambarkan pada tokoh dalam novel Passing oleh Nella Larsen dengan menggunakan rasisme sebagai pendekatan teoritis. Penelitian ini dilakukan dengan menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif. Data dikumpulkan dengan membaca lebih dekat ucapan karakter atau teks narator dalam novel "Passing". Ada 11 data tingkat rasisme yang diklasifikasikan berdasarkan teori Jones (2013) menjadi tiga jenis: bias individu, bias institusional, dan bias budaya. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa ucapan yang dikategorikan sebagai bias individu adalah 10 data, satu data sebagai bias institusional dan data sebagai bias budaya tidak di temukan di dalam novel ini. Efek dari tingkat rasisme seperti ketidaknyamanan di masyarakat, mereka selalu berhati-hati dan berusaha untuk memenuhi asumsi kelompok lain terhadap mereka.



Copyright (c) 2025 Siti Fitriani, Refina Wati, Rif'ah Inayati

1. Introduction

The existence of diversity in society will give rise to many differences, especially in differences of appearance. A community that has a difference in appearance such as skin color, hair shape, and eye color are called a race. According to Tanjung (2023) race is a belief that described the distinction between people and groups that can be caused by some factors in society. This statement is also supported by Clair & Denis (2019) that race is a social construct used to differentiate people into groups based on mostly immutable characteristics, such as phenotype (e.g., skin color, hair texture, or eye shape) and ancestry. Because of these differences, they have a group identity from a social perspective and differ in physical appearance. However, this difference

can create a conflict such as political issues, religion issues, and ethnic issues in social life. This issue is a result of a community's prejudice to the others community that their group is a superior to the other group. From this prejudice later can be lead of racism, especially in African American society.

According to Grosfoguel (2011), racism is a hierarchy of superiority/inferiority along the line of the human. Racism is a belief or prejudice that accepted by a community and they state that their group is superior and more deserving to all good facilities than the others group. As stated by Virginia (2023) that racism issues are very close to everyday life because racist acts have the same pattern and the groups or communities that has a power will do some oppresses to the others group in the society. This kind of belief will continue to stick that their as superior and the others is inferior. Furthermore, the racist that are given to other groups or community has different levels in racism.

According to Jones (2013), there are three racism levels or usually it's called bias. Individual bias is the first level in racism. Individual bias is someone's negative assumption or prejudice to black people or the others group. The second level is institutional bias that can describe as injustice that happened through system or restrict the access of some community's members to social benefits such as law, education, and employment opportunities. Cultural bias is the last level of racism. This level happened when the belief that one's cultural heritage is superior than other groups.

Racism often carried out by the society. Therefore, this condition often depicted or portrayed in literary works such as novel. One of the novels that told the racism in society, especially in African American society is "Passing" by Nella Larsen as the American author. According to Beydoun & Wilson (2017), passing is the phenomenon that nonwhites dedicate themselves as white but they underlying their identity is not changed, but hidden. This novel first published in 1929 and divided into three parts that are Encounter, Re-encounter, and Finale. This novel also focused on phenomenon of race and racial passing in 1920s. It is start from two black woman who have been friends since childhood. One of them passing to white race and this is considered as a traitor of the black race. Because she passing to white race, she gets an assumptions or prejudice from point of view of white people to her race. Therefore, she doesn't tell her identity to people in her new race because that will give an affect to her life.

In this case, there are several previous studies that relevant to this research. First is Brody (1992) that discussed about race and class conflict in Nella Larsen's *Passing*. The second researcher is Kimberly Barron-Brown (2003) that defined a passing and tragic mulatto as the theme. She also examined the effects of the mulatto stigmatism to the psychological and she applied the theme of passing and tragic mulatto to *Passing*. The next researcher that related with this research is Pile (2011) that discussed skin, race and space in Frantz Fanon's *Black Skins, White mask* and Nella Larsen's *Passing*. The nest researcher is Janet J. Graham (2015) that focus on performativity and intersubjectivity in novel *Passing* by Nella Larsen. The next researcher is Ahmed

(2018), to examine the novel *Passing* through intersectionality and the main characters construct their identity in a segregated society and demonstrate that postcolonial literature has a place in the EFL classroom. The others researcher is von Arnold-Grön (2020), that analyzed the mixed race of biracial identity and the tragic mulatto trope in *Passing* novel. The other researchers are Ahmed (2023) and Raheemah (2024) that focus on identity formation and operant conditioning in Nella Larsen's *Passing*. The last one is Shahid (2024), that focused on the hybrid identities on *The Vanishing Half* and *Passing* novel. There are some similarities and differences in this research with the previous study. The similarity is on the object in this research which is the novel of *Passing* by Nella Larsen 1929. Meanwhile, the difference is on the research question or the purposes of the research. This research aims to analyze what is the types of racism level and how the effect of the racism level that portrayed in the characters in novel of *Passing* by Nella Larsen using racism as a theoretical approach.

2. Method

In this research, the researcher used the qualitative descriptive and close reading method. According to Mohr (1999), qualitative is an evaluative function that related to the implementation process, analysis process, interpretation, and understanding of the experience. It means that qualitative method is using words or sentences to interpretation the data. Meanwhile, close reading is the process of doing critical thinking to find the hidden meaning in a text. According to Ohrvik (2024), there are three steps in doing close reading such as establishing text's readability and what is the purposes of reading it, exploring the text, and the last one is interpreting the text.

The instrument in this research is human instrument. Meanwhile, the data in this research was taken from novel "*Passing*" by Nella Larsen and the data in this novel is the character's utterances and narrator's text that contain of racism. According to Ohrvik (2024), to collect the data, the researchers must do some steps to collection the data. First, read novel "*Passing*" per chapter. The second step is note and mark the data or some evidence in each chapter in this novel. Third, classify the data based on the three racism levels and the last is interpretation and conclude the research.

3. Result and Discussion

Tabel 1
Types of Racism Level in Novel "*Passing*"

No.	Types	Total
1.	Individual Bias	10
2.	Institutional Bias	1
Total		11

According to Jones (2013), that are three level of racism that are individual bias, institutional bias, and the last one is cultural bias. From the table above,

there are the data that found in the novel "Passing" by Nella Larsen are (11) level of racism as the result. The level of racism that depicted or in the novel "Passing" by Nella Larsen by the utterance of the characters and the narrator's text are: (10) data form Individual Bias and (1) data of Institutional Bias.

a) Individual Bias

According to Jones (2013), individual bias is the negative assumption or prejudice to black people. In the novel of "Passing" by Nella Larsen, there are 9 data of this level in Table 1.

"Thank the Lord, no! And never expect to! But I know people who've known them, better than they know their black selves. And I read in the papers about them. Always robbing and killing people. And," he added darkly, "worse." [p. 70]

From the first data above, it shows the negative prejudice to black people when Irene, Clare, Gertrude and Mr. Bellew drunk tea together and they discussed about negro. *"And I read in the papers about them. Always robbing and killing people. And," he added darkly, "worse."* From this utterance, it shows white people's perspective or negative prejudice that they didn't like them because they always know or hear a rumor about black people which is a bad rumor. Jones stated, the outcome of individual-level bias is expressed as a negative attitude about an entire group, resulting in behavior that directly discriminates against a person belonging to that group (2013). Irene, Clare, Gertrude and Mr. Bellew prejudice on negro can be classified as personal, because they don't know personally the person but they have already known the assumptions that negroes are bad.

*Clare made a small mischievous grimace and proceeded
"Besides, to their notion, hard labour was good for me. I had Negro blood."
[p.39]*

This utterance is the next data of individual level. It happened when Irene and Clare talked about the work in the past. The utterance *"Hard labour was good for me. I had Negro blood"*, it shows that became a hard labor was good for black people. According to Jones (2013), the history of slavery in the United States to against black people is one of the examples of how the history and context shape stereotypes about a community. From Clare's utterance can be regarded as individual, because a black people deserve to hard work or inappropriate works such a servants or slaves.

*"My goodness, Jack! What difference would it make if, after all these years, you were to find out that I was one or two per cent coloured?"
"Oh, no. Nig," he declared, "nothing like that with me. I know you're no nigger, so it's all right. You can get as black as you please as far as I'm concerned, since I know you're no nigger. I draw the line at that. No niggers in my family. Never have been and never will be." [p. 68]*

The next data is happened when Clare asked to her husband how if he knows that Clare has one or two percent negro blood. The utterance "*No niggers in my family. Never have been and never will be*"; it shows that Mr. Bellew didn't want any negroes in his family, even if they were just a servants and Mr. Bellew also decided that he didn't want to have a black generic. According to Tyson (2020), there is a conflict between two cultures: the black culture that grew from African and it is evolved in reaction to a history of racist oppression and the European culture that forced by white Amerika. When white people married with a black man, their child will be difficult to acceptable in African and American culture. Based on Jone's theory, it can be categorized as personal because Mr. Bellew will never accept a negro into his family.

"So, you dislike Negroes, Mr. Bellew?"

"I don't dislike them, I hate them. They give me the creeps. The black scrimy devils." [p. 69 – 70]

The next data is happened when Irene, Clare, Gertrude and Mr. Bellew drunk a tea in a party, they talked about negro and Irene asked Mr. Bellew about what they discussed. This utterance "*I hate them. They give me the creeps. The black scrimy devils.*", shows the reason that white people dislike a negro because they have a darker skin color and it is very scary for white people as their perspective. As Delgado & Stefancic stated, in contrast the blackness and darkness often carry the prejudice of evil, danger, terror and villains are often depicted as dark and wearing black clothing (2023). This can be lead the assumptions about negro that they have a bad character. Based on Jone's theory, the reason why Mr. Bellew hate a negro can be classified as personal because they believe the perspective about negro has a bad traits because of their scary skin color.

"They're always raving about the good looks of some Negro, preferably an unusually dark" [p. 138 – 139]

From the data above, it said by Hugh when he and Irene were watching Clare who dancing with negroes in party. From Hugh's utterance "*They're always raving about the good looks of some Negro, preferably an unusually dark*", it shows he believes that the darker the skin color of black people, the more they will be liked or preferred by others. It is just an assumption that will never be true. Because in contrast, as stated by Delgado & Stefancic the darkness and blackness of negroes often carry the assumption of something bad (2023). Therefore, Hugh's utterance it can be showed satire because they just feel better than lighter negro in their race as a result of intermarriage.

"So you're a nigger, a damned dirty nigger!" His voice was a snarl and a moan, an expression of rage and of pain [p. 208]

The last data is happened when Clare in the party which is only for black people. This utterance "*a damned dirty nigger!*" *His voice was a snarl and a moan, an expression of rage and of pain*, shows that Mr. Bellew very angry to Clare because he knows the fact that his wife is negro and it makes him felt disappointed. He told before that he didn't want any negroes in his family members but, his wife is a negro. According to Tyson (2020), a negative stereotype to black people is influenced by the myths that negroes are less moral and less civilized. So, it can be categorized as individual because it makes Mr. Bellew felt deeply disappointed because Clare lied to him.

From all the data above, it gives the effect for black people because there is a negative assumption and it makes black people feel threatened. It is shown from this utterance:

Nevertheless, Irene felt, in turn, anger, scorn, and fear slide over her. It wasn't that she was ashamed of being a Negro, or even of having it declared. It was the idea of being ejected from any place, even in the polite and tactful way in which the Drayton would probably do it, that disturbed her. [p.19]

This happened when Irene started to felt intimidated by people's stares when she was in a restaurant. From this narration *Nevertheless, Irene felt, in turn, anger, scorn, and fear slide over her. That disturbed her*, it shows that Irene started to felt uncomfortable because of white people's gaze on her. As Phiri stated, the white gaze has been a significant part of a white supremacist racial that operate to limit the freedom, dignity, safety and welfare of black people (2020). What Irene feels can be regarded as the effect of individual bias because a negative gazes or assumptions towards black people it can limit their activity in society.

Irene was glad that he was being nice to Clare, and glad that Clare was having the opportunity to discover that some coloured men were superior to some white men [p. 136]

"But, Hugh, you've got to admit that the average coloured man is a better dancer than the average white man" [p. 138]

The data above is the other impacts of individual bias. In this data, it can be seen that Irene felt happy when she saw Clare often dance with a negro in a party which mean black man better at dancing than white. The narration *Irene was glad that he was being nice to Clare, and glad that Clare was having the opportunity to discover that some coloured men were superior to some white men* and the utterance *"But, Hugh, you've got to admit that the average coloured man is a better dancer than the average white man"*, shows that Irene felt proud of Clare because she often dancing with negroes which are better at dancing than white people and she asked Hugh to admit that black man is very good at dancing. As Tyson stated, there is a prejudice that negroes are born athletes, originally good dancers and it caused they have natural rhythm (2020). This situation can be said as the effect of individual bias because Irene

starts to influenced with the prejudice from white and she is starting to fulfill these stereotypes.

b) Institutional Bias

According to Jones (2013), institutional bias is the restrict the access of some group or people to social benefit such as education, law, etc. In the novel of "Passing" by Nella Larsen, there are just one data of this level in Table 1.

"Dad, why is it that they only lynch coloured people?" Ted asked. "Because they hate 'em, son."

"Brian!" Irene's voice was a plea and a rebuke.

Ted said: "Oh! And why do they hate em?"

"Because they are afraid of them"

"But what makes them afraid of 'em?"

"Because—"

"Brian!" [p. 190]

In this data above, the conversation happened when Irene's family have a dinner. It is start from Brian read a newspaper about a law of dead negroes and Ted as Irene's son asked about it. The utterance *"Dad, why is it that they only lynch coloured people?" Because they hate 'em, son. Because they are afraid of them"*, it shows that the explanation from Brian to his son that the law when black people have a mistake, they will be killed. They will do this law because they afraid if black people hurt them so, they feel safe if they kill a negro. As Jones stated, they support institutional policies that benefit their group, often at the expense of other groups (2013). It can be classified as institutional because Brian described that there is a rule for negroes when they are doing a mistake, they will be killed.

From the data above, it gives the effect for black people because there is a law when negroes have a mistake. It shows from this utterance:

"Just the same you're not to talk to them about the race problem. I won't have it" They glared at each other.

"I tell you, Irene, they've got to know these things, and it might as well be now as later." [p. 192]

This utterance happened when Brain and Irene debated, because she does not want to tell her son about the law, but Brian wants to explain it so that his son know about the rules for black people. From this utterance *"I tell you, Irene, they've got to know these things, and it might as well be now as later"*, it shows that Brian wants his son to know and be careful if he wants to do something, because if his son does something wrong, he will be killed by the government. It occurs because of systematic and direct racism manifested in laws and policies as well as personal implicit biases, result in black being the targets of police violence (Sigfúsdóttir & Collaborators, 2021). This conversation can be categorized as the effect of institutional bias because there is a rule for

black people when they do a crime, they will be killed. Therefore, Brian advises his son earlier to be careful because there is a particular law for negroes.

4. Conclusion

Based on the result and discussion, it can be concluded that the researcher found two types of racism level that found in Nella Larsen's "Passing". There are 10 utterances of the characters that can be categorized as individual level. One utterance that can be classified as institutional level and for cultural level is not found in this novel. From all the utterances, it can give the effect for the characters in the novel, especially for black people. They will feel discomfort in society, they must be careful because there is a law for them and they try to fulfill other groups prejudice to them.

The finding in this study is in line with Jones's theory and it is because in the finding, the writer found the types of racism based on the theory. In the previous studies, there are 4 previous studies that discussed racism but used a different theory. Those are Brody (1992), Pile (2010), Ahmed (2023) and Raheemah (2024). In the first previous study, it is discussed racism used black feminist theory and how the racism oppressed black woman. The second previous study discussed about bodily experience as an arena in which racism operates and explained how racism not only shaped social identities, but also influenced individual's physical experiences used Frantz Fanon's corporeal schemas and epidermal schemas theory. The next previous study is discussed racism used critical race theory and focus on discriminatory laws in conventional marriages between African American. The last previous study is discussed racism in 20s that there are racist pressures in society that separate individuals based on skin color used Skinner's theory. There is the implication between this study and the previous study. In previous study, does not show any discussion of the effects of black people themselves but more on racism that exist. On the other hand, this study discusses the effect of the racism that are received or felt by negro or people who experience it. Therefore, this study can help the readers to understand about the types of racism level in society and know the effects of the racism level on people who experienced it or in their environment.

References

- Ahmed, A., Farooq, A., & e Afshan, D. (2023). Identity Formation: A Study of Conventional Marriages and Structure of African American Families in Their Eyes Were Watching God and Passing. *Pakistan Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences*, 11(1), 613–623.
- Ahmed, L. (2018). *Constructing identities in a segregated society in Nella Larsen's Passing: The importance of teaching literature in an EFL classroom*.
- Beydoun, K. A., & Wilson, E. K. (2017). Reverse passing. *UCLA L. Rev.*, 64, 282.
- Brody, J. D. (1992). Clare Kendry's "true" colors: Race and class conflict in Nella Larsen's passing. *Callaloo*, 15(4), 1053–1065.
- Clair, M., & Denis, J. S. (2019). Jasmine Oliver. *International Encyclopedia of the Social & Behavioral Sciences, Second Edition* (Vol. 19)

- Delgado, R., & Stefancic, J. (2023). *Critical race theory: An introduction* (Vol. 87). NyU press.
- Grosfoguel, R. (2011). Decolonizing post-colonial studies and paradigms of political-economy: Transmodernity, decolonial thinking, and global coloniality. *Transmodernity: Journal of Peripheral Cultural Production of the Luso-Hispanic World*, 1(1).
- Jones, J. M., Dovidio, J. F., & Vietze, D. L. (2013). *The psychology of diversity: Beyond prejudice and racism*. John Wiley & Sons.
- Mohr, L. B. (1999). The qualitative method of impact analysis. *The American Journal of Evaluation*, 20(1), 69–84.
- Ohrvik, A. (2024). What is close reading? An exploration of a methodology. *Rethinking History*, 1–23.
- Phiri, J. J. (2020). The Hegemony of the White Gaze in America and Black Resistance as Counter-hegemony. *The University of British Columbia*
- Pile, S. (2011). Skin, race and space: the clash of bodily schemas in Frantz Fanon's Black Skins, White Masks and Nella Larsen's Passing. *Cultural Geographies*, 18(1), 25–41.
- Raheemah, T. A., & Alhelah, A. R. (2024). Exploring Operant Conditioning in Nella Larsen's Passing: Beyond Clash of Civilizations. *International Journal of Social Science and Human Research*, 11(7), 8662-8668.
- Shahid, M. L. G., Siddiq, S., & Mansur, M. S. B. (2024). Navigating Hybrid Identities: A Comparative Analysis of The Vanishing Half and Passing. *Al-Qirtas*, 3(3), 182–203.
- Sigfúsdóttir, I. D., & Collaborators, G. B. D. 2019 P. V. U. S. S. (2021). *Fatal police violence by race and state in the USA, 1980–2019: a network meta-regression*.
- Tanjung, A. F., Wardana, M. K., & Mayasari, M. (2023). Hate Speech Addressed to Puan Maharani on Social Media: Pragmatic Approach. *Kajian Linguistik Dan Sastra*, 2(3), 245–255.
- Tyson, L. (2020). *Using critical theory: How to read and write about literature*. Routledge.
- Virginia, O., Ernanda, E., & Triandana, A. (2023). Analisis Wacana Kritis Theo van Leeuwen dalam Pemberitaan Mengenai Isu Rasisme Terhadap Boyband Korea BTS (Beyond The Scene) pada Media Pemberitaan Daring Kompas, Kumparan dan Republika. *Kajian Linguistik Dan Sastra*, 2(2), 151–160.
- von Arnold-Grön, S. (2020). *Navigating the Colour Line: A Critical Mixed Race Study of Biracial Identity and the Tragic Mulatto Trope in Nella Larsen's Passing*.