

## The Portrayal Of Racial Discrimination and Its Negative Effects Portrayed In *The Butler* (2013) Movie

<sup>1</sup>Vannodya Surya Aisyia\*, <sup>2</sup>Riana Permatasari

<sup>1,2</sup>English Literature Department Universitas Islam Sultan Agung

\*Corresponding Author:  
[vannodyas@gmail.com](mailto:vannodyas@gmail.com)

### Abstract

*This study focused on the analysis of racial discrimination based on the true story that happened in America around the 20<sup>th</sup> century that was portrayed in The Butler movie. The purposes of this study are to explain how racial discrimination is experienced by the characters and to analyze how the negative effect of racial discrimination. This study analyzed Cecil and Louis as characters in The Butler movie and used the descriptive qualitative method. The data are taken from the movie script such as dialogues, narratives, and monologues. Some steps used to collect the data such as watching the movie, reading the movie script, identifying the data, classifying the data, and reducing the data. The results of the analysis show that Cecil and Louis Gaines as characters in the film have experienced racial discrimination by white people in America. Cecil as the White House butler was treated unfairly, such as receiving lower pay from white staff and helpers also judgment due to his different skin color. Louis is Cecil's son and he is a student. Louis also received unfair treatment such as going to colored schools because black people and white people have different schools. Louis and Cecil got separate public facilities because they were black people and black people and white people did not share the same public facilities. The study also revealed that racial discrimination hurts mental health such as stress, anxiety, sleeplessness, and irritability. The character also feels other negative impacts such as general welfare such as low self-esteem, low life satisfaction, and low happiness.*

**Keyword:** *Racism, racial discrimination, and negative effect of racial discrimination.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

There are so many aspects that appear in literature such as psychology, sociology, politics, etc. Sociology and literature are connected. Davita states “Sociology is the study of various traits of society and the relationship between societies to the social stability of their environment” (qtd. In Bestya and Candraningrum 5). Sociology is always related to the environment and human society. Most of the authors get their inspiration based on experiences in society. Literature is a cultural artifact that represents previous interactions as understood by the author and affects the reader's subsequent interactions give influence on social interaction-literature makes the legitimate subject of sociological research (Merrill 650). Studying the sociology aspect of literature is very useful for understanding social situations, political issues, worldviews, and creativity of authors.

Racial discrimination is one of the big social issues in the world. Racial discrimination and sociology correlate because racial discrimination refers to unequal treatment of race. “Racial discrimination is a pervasive phenomenon in the lives of many racial minorities” (Sellers and Shelton 1079). It indicates that racial discrimination is inequality between majority race and minority race.

Among countries all over the world, America has a complex problem of racial issues in history. In *The American Family in Black and White: A Post-Racial Strategy for Improving Skills to Promote Equality* book by James J. Heckman states:

*Disparities between Blacks and Whites are persistent features of American society. On many measures, Blacks, as a group perform worse than Whites, and the trends, are not encouraging. These disparities are continuing reminders of America's troubled history of racial discrimination. They clash with American beliefs about equality, opportunity, and social mobility. (3)*

The history of American society is very persistent about skin color. They believe in inequality between blacks and whites.

Racial discrimination can bring out various negative effects. According to *Measuring Racial Discrimination* by National Research Council “Black-white gaps in income, employment, higher education, test scores, housing segregation, health care, and treatment within the criminal justice system are large” (49). It means that people who experience racial discrimination will feel stress because they feel threatened or feel loss (pride, family member, job, etc). They also can feel that they do not have so much control in their life, which can lead to anxiety and depression. However, experiencing racial discrimination also can make them feel injustice.

In addition, Brown, David, et al states “racial discrimination in the employment domain was also related to low levels of life satisfaction and happiness, and high levels of psychological distress” (119). For example, the race who experiences racial discrimination needs to be happy and satisfied with their payment even though they got less than other races even have the same job.

“PRD has negative effects on physical health (e.g., cardiovascular disease,

diabetes, nausea, pain, & headaches), mental health (e.g., depression, anxiety, psychosis or paranoia, stress, & post-traumatic stress), and general well-being (e.g., lower self-esteem, lower life satisfaction, quality of life, & low happiness)” (Chng and Tan 462). Experiencing racial discrimination also can cause mental health that also can lead to physical health, for example, headaches because of stress. Not only that, racial discrimination that involves physical violence also can cause pain.

This study is about racial discrimination which shows in the movie *The Butler* by Danny Strong. It presents about black people in America in the 20<sup>th</sup> century who experiences racial discrimination and gets negative effects because of it. Cecil Gaines worked to serve the president. Before he became a butler, he was a farmer at a cotton farm in Macon, Georgia and he received a lot of racial discrimination. He is quite happy with his job as a butler even though he still experiences racial discrimination although not as many as before. Louis, his first son has a different opinion from Cecil. He thought that black people and white people must have the same opportunities. Louis thought that being a butler even at the White House was not a job that someone should be proud of. He thinks that black people and white must have the same opportunities, so that is why without Cecil knowing it he joins the civil rights movement.

## **2. METHOD**

This study used a qualitative method. Qualitative research methods are presented descriptively not in statistical method analysis like numbers. According to Sutton and Austin “Qualitative research can help researchers to access the thoughts and feelings of research participants, which can enable the development of an understanding of the meaning that people ascribe to their experiences” (230). The data were presented descriptively in the form of words, phrases or sentences, prologues, monologues or dialogues, quotations, or paraphrasing.

Data organizing was divided into two parts, data collecting method, and type of data. Data collecting methods were also divided into five parts including watching the movie, reading the movie script, identifying the data, classifying the data, and reducing the data.

In organizing the data, the first step was watching the movie, entitled *The Butler*, which has been watched intensely to understand the whole storyline. Furthermore, reading the movie script several times was intended to get a deep understanding. The next step was identifying the data. The form of the data identified at this stage is the attitude that reflected the character, and message from the dialogues, monologues, and narratives. The next step of this research was classifying the data. The data was arranged in classes or groups. After the data are arranged, the researchers listed the data in a table. The table is based on the problem formulations. It contained a column of numbers, quotes from the movie script, time of the movie and page of a movie script, and types of analysis, type of data, comment, and reference. The table was known as the appendix. The last process was reducing the data. Reducing the data was the process of taking out data that does not have any correlation. It is needed to be stored in the most efficient data form by using relevant techniques so that the study can be presented properly.

There were two types of data in this study. The primary data as the main source were taken from the movie script entitled *The Butler* (2013) as the object of the study. This movie is 2 hours 12 minutes long, distributed by The Weinstein Company and

directed by Lee Daniels with a screenplay by Danny Strong. Secondary data were taken from journals, books, articles which are related to this study.

The final step in this study was analyzing the data, consisting of analyzing and reporting the data from the movie. The researcher used a qualitative method by watching the movie in analyzing the data. The data were taken from the movie such as dialogues, monologues, and narratives. The complete analysis as the result of this study was stated in the next chapter. The complete data were shown in the appendix.

### 3. FINDING AND DISCUSSIONS

This discussion would explain negative effects of racial discrimination which is presented in Cecil and Louis as the characters of *The Butler* movie by Danny Strong. The movie tells about some negative effects of racial discrimination. Moreover, Pager and Shepherd argue that "According to its most simple definition, racial discrimination refers to unequal treatment of persons or groups on the basis of their race or ethnicity" (182). There are negative effects experienced by Cecil and Louis.

#### Feeling Loss

According to Bowser et al, "Thus, the experience of racial discrimination can be stressful and reduce a person's sense of control and meaning while evoking feelings of loss, ambiguity, strain, frustration, and injustice." (qtd. In Brown et al, 118). It means that minority race who experience discrimination tends to feel stress because of being threatened by the majority race and feeling loss such as pride, role in the family, family member, job. At the beginning of *The Butler* movie, Cecil worked on the white cotton farm with his father and mother. As in the movie it mentioned that:

Cecil: "Pa...What you goin' do?"

Earl turns to Thomas defiantly.

Earl: "Hey! Don't you ever do that to my wife."

Thomas pulls his revolver out. Cecil looks terrified, as everyone watches in silence. Then Thomas SHOTS Earl square in the eye!

Cecil: "Dad!" (Strong 10)

The dialogue above tells that Cecil used to work on white people's cotton farm when he was 8 years old. In that scene when he picked cotton with his parent suddenly Thomas, a white man, pulled Cecil's mother and hit her. Cecil's father was shot by Thomas while trying to defend his wife and make young Cecil lose his father.

At the end of the movie, Cecil also feels the loss. This time he feels loss after a long time working at the white house. He does not feel as enthusiastic about work as before. It is portrayed through this quotation:

Tired, Cecil passes out cookies to bratty CHILDREN on a White House tour. For the first time, he looks irritated at work.

Shoes lay everywhere. On his hands and knees, Cecil shines them. He looks tired, almost angry.

Cecil V.O.: I had always loved serving. But it just felt different now. I didn't know that an old man could feel so lost. But that's how I felt... That's how I felt.

Cecil sits alone on a pew. He's deep in prayer. He looks beyond the altar for guidance. A sign.

Cecil drives his car through the rural countryside. He looks lost

still. Gloria sits by his side. (Strong 100-101)

In this scene, Cecil worked in the White House for about 30 years. He used to enjoy being a butler. He always did his best and hides his feelings when he was working. However, he felt different now. He was tired and looked annoyed. He felt loss and does not know anymore what it means to be a good butler.

### **Physical Health**

Another negative effect of racial discrimination is having bad physical health like pain. Chng and Tan state "PRD has negative effects on physical health (e.g., cardiovascular disease, diabetes, nausea, pain, & headaches), mental health (e.g., depression, anxiety, psychosis or paranoia, stress, & post-traumatic stress) and general well-being (e.g., lower self-esteem, lower life satisfaction, quality of life, & low happiness). (462). Being physically or psychologically hurt by one race for no apparent reason and just because of racial differences is a form of racial discrimination. Especially if it affects their physical health and has a negative impact such as feeling pain physically.

A group of angry white TEENAGERS walks towards the sit-in.  
They enter the lunch counter area and begin to brutally YELL at the students. They SPIT on them, THROW food on them until it turns into an all out beating!

A White Student DUMPS ketchup on a black girl's head. The black students stare forward calmly.

A white girl SPITS on Carol.

A white teenager THROWS coffee at Louis' face. He SCREAMS! (Strong 43)

Louis and other black students sit on the white section in this scene. White teenagers act arbitrarily just because black students sit in white seats because white students think white is better and don't want themselves to be equal. White teenagers beat them and throw hot coffee in Louis' face. He screamed because he was in pain.

### **Mental Health**

Moreover, racial discrimination can also have a negative impact on mental health such as post-traumatic stress that can come from childhood events. Whereas, "childhood trauma includes common childhood difficulties such as sexual, emotional, parental separation, mental illness, death of a parent and more" (Iyer K and Khan Z.A 80-81). From that quotation, childhood events can traumatize until adulthood because childhood trauma includes the loss of a loved and serious medical illness so it will be remembered until adult. As a university student, Louis needs to go out of town. Cecil as father found it hard to let Louis go. It is portrayed through this quotation:

Cecil: I can't protect him in the south.

Gloria: The south has changed Cecil. The south ain't what it was when you was there. (Strong 34)

Before becoming a butler, Cecil had a childhood at a cotton field in the south. His father died because shot by the owner of the cotton field. He also remembers his mother was also beaten by white people. His life in the south was bad. He experienced a lot of traumatic events in the south before making Cecil hard to let go of Louis to study in the south.

In addition, Cecil also experiences other mental health. with Brown et al statement

that "the authors found that lifetime and past year discriminatory events were associated with high psychiatric symptoms (i.e., anxiety, depression, obsessive-compulsive, interpersonal sensitivity, somatization). (119). It means that someone who experiences racial discrimination for years has built symptoms of mental health without they are knowing it.

It shows when Cecil worked at the hotel and he did a great job there. In this scene, Cecil was at home with his family. Suddenly he received a call from his boss. He feels anxious when he takes the call. It is portrayed through these quotations:

Cecil V.O.: When the white man called, I always assumed the worst.

Cecil: Yes sir?

Cecil V.O.: I would have put money on it that I was getting laid off or something that day. (Strong 15-16)

Cecil was always worried when white people called him that made him have negative thoughts. Even though he did not do anything wrong he still got anxious and made Cecil think that he might be doing a bad job but he did not notice it.

### **General Well Being**

Furthermore, general well-being like lower self-esteem, lower life satisfaction, quality of life and, low happiness are also negative impacts of racial discrimination. It is aligned with what April, Valrie, et al state "experiences of discrimination and perceived racism to a range of psychosocial difficulties in African American youth, including low self-esteem and depressive symptoms." (669). Someone who perceives racial discrimination in society usually feels low self-esteem because they feel inadequate even though they are good enough.

In *The Butler* movie, it tells that Maynard was offered to change jobs at a nicer hotel. However, Maynard felt he was too old to move and was comfortable in the old place so he recommended Cecil as his replacement to move. Cecil is happy but also feeling insecure that he is good. As the movie mention:

Maynard: Yeah... I was thinking about taking it... But I dunno, I'm too old to be leaving North Carolina. I'm just fine right here. I told them to hire you.

Surprised, Cecil looks up at Maynard.

Cecil: I'm just now finding my way 'round this hotel. I'm not ready for those high falootin' white people with all their fancy words. (Strong 10)

Cecil thought if he moved, he was not ready to face white people's personalities in there. He did not believe that himself is good enough to serve white people in a good hotel.

However, according to Brown, David, et al "Racial discrimination in the employment domain was also related to low levels of life satisfaction and happiness, and high levels of psychological distress." (119). A race that experiences discrimination likely to have a low target on life satisfaction. When their well-being improves a little while still accepting racial discrimination they tend to feel happy which makes them have low happiness too.

There is a scene that Cecil as black people have low satisfaction and low happiness. After worked at the white house for so long Cecil ventured to ask for a raise because black people received less salary and hard to get promoted than white people

and they have to be satisfied and happy about that. It is portrayed through this quotation:

RD Warner: What do you want?

Cecil: Since the colored...the black staff...does just as much work as the white staff, I believe that our salaries should reflect our service, sir.

RD Warner: 'Black' staff?

Cecil: I also feel that we should have opportunities of advancement. No black houseman have ever been promoted to the engineer's office.

RD Warner stares at Cecil for a long beat. Then -

RD Warner: You're very well liked here, Cecil, but if you're unhappy with your salary or position, than I suggest you seek employment elsewhere.

Cecil: With all due respect sir...

RD Warner: Don't let that Martin Luther King shit fill your britches out. Just remember where I found you. (Strong 73)

Experienced racial discrimination of being a black employee made Cecil and other black staff had low satisfaction and happiness. They must be satisfied and happily get less payment than the white employee. If they feel unsatisfied with their salary, they can quit their job. They also felt difficult to get promoted.

#### **4. CONCLUSION**

Racial discrimination is experienced by Cecil and Louis as black people characters. Cecil and Louis are father and son. Cecil as a White House black butler and Louis as a civil rights activist for black people become the object of discrimination. They get discrimination like unequal treatment, judgment, stereotype, and victim of the street crime. All of these mistreatments are done by white people.

Racial discrimination has a negative effect on Cecil and Louis. Racial discrimination has affected Louis' physical health like sometimes getting injured and feeling pain. It also affected Cecil's mental health such as anxiety and post-traumatic stress. Besides that, unfair treatments because of racial discrimination make Cecil has low general well-being such as low self-esteem, low happiness, low life satisfaction, and feeling loss.

#### **ACKNOWLEDGEMENT**

I would like to send my gratitude to Allah SWT for giving me this opportunity to complete my final project. The first person I would thank is my parent. Then, I would to my sister and all my friends. I would like to thank to all of the people who support me to finish this final project. I also would like to send my gratitude to Mrs. Riana Permatasari M.Pd., M.A as my supervisor for her patience and for her perseverance to guide me to complete my final project. Last but not least, I would like to thank to myself because I can be finish this final project in the end.

#### **References**

Bestya, Riza Walidaini, and Phil Dewi Candraningrum. "Family Disintegration in Nicholas Sparks "The Best Of Me"(2011): A Sociological Study." *Diss. Universitas Muhammadiyah Surakarta* (2018). <http://eprints.ums.ac.id/id/eprint/63768>

Brown, Tony N., et al. "Being black and feeling blue": The mental health consequences of racial

- 
- discrimination." *Race and Society*, Vol. 2, No.2 (2000): 117-131.  
[https://doi.org/10.1016/S1090-9524\(00\)00010-3](https://doi.org/10.1016/S1090-9524(00)00010-3)
- Chng, Bao & Chee-Seng Tan. "The Effect of Perceived Racial Discrimination on Aggression." *Pertanika Journal of Social Science and Humanities*. (2017): 461-472.  
<http://www.pertanika.upm.edu.my/>
- Heckman, James J. "The American family in Black & White: A post-racial strategy for improving skills to promote equality." *Daedalus*, Vol.140, No. 2, (2011): 70-89.  
[https://doi.org/10.1162/DAED\\_a\\_00078](https://doi.org/10.1162/DAED_a_00078)
- K, Iyer. Khan Z.A. "Depression-A Review." *Research Journal of Recent Sciences*, Vol.1, No. 4, (2012): 80-81. [https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Zaved-Khan/publication/273769453\\_Depression\\_-\\_A\\_Review/links/550c09370cf2b2450b4e5dbc/Depression-A-Review.pdf](https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Zaved-Khan/publication/273769453_Depression_-_A_Review/links/550c09370cf2b2450b4e5dbc/Depression-A-Review.pdf)
- Merrill, Francis E. "The Sociology of Literature." *Social Research*, Vol. 34, No. 4, (1967): 648–659.  
<https://www.jstor.org/stable/40970748>
- Pager, Devah, and Hana Shepherd. "The sociology of discrimination: Racial discrimination in employment, housing, credit, and consumer markets." *Annu. Rev. Sociol.* Vol. 34, (2008): 181-209. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.soc.33.040406.131740>
- Sellers, Robert M., and J. Nicole Shelton. "The Role of Racial Identity in Perceived Racial Discrimination." *Journal Of Personality And Social Psychology* (2003): 1079-1093. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.84.5.1079>
- Sutton, Jane, and Zubin Austin. "Qualitative research: Data collection, analysis, and management." *The Canadian journal of hospital pharmacy*, Vol. 68, No. 3 (2015): 226.  
<https://doi.org/10.4212/cjhp.v68i3.1456>