# THE EARLY TO THE MIDDLE OF 20TH CENTURY RACIAL DISCRIMINATION IN AMERICA AS REFLECTED IN THREE POEMS BY LANGSTON HUGHES ENTITLED "I, TOO, LAUGHERS, AND MERRY GO-ROUND"

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#### Abstract

In this research, the writer analyzes Langston Hughes poems entitled "I, Too, Laughers, and Merry Go-Round". The writer focuses on the racial discrimination which happened in the early to the middle of 20th century in America. Then, the main purpose of this research is to explain about the depiction of racial discrimination in America inside Langston Hughes poems. To analyze the problem structurally, the writer used socio-historical approach since this research is focused on the racial discrimination in America in the early to the middle of 20th century. Meanwhile, the writer applied library research to collect the data and descriptive qualitative method to elaborate the data. The result of this analysis shows that there is the depiction of racial discrimination in public facilities and employment. In the first poem I, Too, it contains the issue of racial discrimination in the field of employment. Then, from the second poem that is Laughers, the writer found the depiction of racial discrimination in employment. After that, racial discrimination in public facilities found in the third poem entitled Merry Go-round.

**Key words:** Poems, Literature, Discrimation, Reflection

# INTRODUCTION

Literary works uniquely contain stories from author's experience, feeling and emotion (Samanik, 2019; Setri & Setiawan, 2020; Zuhud, 2014). Besides that, literature can be used as the medium to deliver author perspective and feeling toward something happening in their life (Al Falaq et al., 2021; EWK, 2018; Nugroho, 2021). Literature is an expression of society. It means that literature may reflect a situation or a condition such as politics, economics, and social life of some people in certain period of time. Through reading literary works, reader can learn about the condition of society in particular time. Poem is one example of literary works. It may contain expression of emotion, feeling, experience and social condition. Poem is production of the poet's imagination and it constructs the best words in the best order (KENDRA, 2015; Novawan et al., 2020; Nurmalasari & Samanik, 2018). Since poetry is a part of literary works, thus poetry may contain author's knowledge or experience toward the social condition because it is closely related to human life.

Poetry can be used as an agent of self-discovery and cultural change, achieves a new intensity (Pradana & Suprayogi, 2021; Pranoto & Suprayogi, 2020; Zhu et al., 2021). It implies that poetry can be used as the medium to deliver the poet's opinion toward certain social condition in particular time such as racial discrimination that happened in some places of America. Racial discrimination is unequal treatment of persons or groups on the basis of their race or ethnicity, common descent, blood or heredity (Amelia, 2021; Aminatun & Oktaviani, 2019; Suprayogi & Pranoto, 2020). Discrimination, a concrete

form of racism, is known as an unfavorable action toward people because they are members of a particular ethnic group (Ahluwalia, 2020; Oktaviani, 2018; Oktaviani & Desiarti, 2019). It means that racial discrimination is unequal action toward a particular ethnic group in certain area that uses race as the basis reason of discrimination. Therefore, this issue is same as racial discrimination existing in United States.

In 1900 the discrimination happened in many sites such as in restaurants, hotels and many public areas (Afrianto & Gulö, 2019; Dewantoro, 2021; Herison et al., 2019). Segregation in theaters, restaurants, hotels, and buses was a constant irritant in everyday life and an insulting inconvenience (Ayu & Aminatun, 2021; Gulö & Nainggolan, 2021; Suprayogi et al., 2021). It resulted in direct confrontations between racial minorities claiming the right to pay for goods and services in the marketplace, and white business owners who claimed the right to serve whom they chose. Many historians have relied on oral history and material evidence (such as photos of signs reading "White-trade only" on places of business).

From quotation above, it can be seen that unequal right happened because the black had to get experience of being labeled as nonwhite and could not get an equal right to get the facilities or treatments that were actually served for public (Gulö & Nainggolan, 2021; Heaverly & EWK, 2020; Suprayogi, 2021). This contrast became the issue which cannot be denied by the African Americans, but they tried to make an effort to break this discrimination (Abidin et al., 2021; Adelina & Suprayogi, 2020; Pajar & Putra, 2021). For instance, one of the blacks' efforts was trough literary works, by the works they wanted to deliver their protest, opinion or even they shattered the issues about uneducated or uncivilized African-Americans (Afrianto & Ma'rifah, 2020; Kardiansyah & Salam, 2020; Puspita, 2021). Moreover, Langston Hughes is one of the literary men who involved in making works about racism issue.

In 1921, Hughes returned to the United States and enrolled at Columbia University where he studied briefly. During the time, he quickly became a part of Harlem's burgeoning cultural movement which was commonly known as the Harlem Renaissance, as well known as the New Negro Movement. This movement having purpose to share their opinion toward the equality between African Americans and White people consisted of Negro artist, dancer, writer, singer, etc. Hughes dropped out of Columbia in 1922 and worked various part-time jobs as like a busboy, a jazzer, a clerk and a flower sales man around New York for the following year before signing on as a steward on a freighter that brought him to Africa and Spain. He left the ship in 1924 and lived for a brief time in Paris, where he continued to develop and publish his poetry.

Considering the explanation above, racial discrimination issue happening in 20th century was quite significant, we can use it as the directive to live our life so that this issue will not happen in the future. Then, the writer focuses on three poems by Langston Hughes entitled:"I, Too" written in 1921-1930, "Laughers" written in 1921-1930, and "Merry Go-Round" written in 1941-1950. The three poems have the possibility of containing the depiction of racial discrimination in America in the 20th century. Furthermore, the writer applies socio-historical approach to identify the correlation of social condition in the past that influenced the author to create his works.

### LITERATURE REVIEW

#### **Socio-Historical Approach**

In order to analyze the events reflected in Hughes's poems, the writer employs socio-historical approach as the theory to analyze data. It is used by the writer in doing analysis since the topic of discussion talks about racial discrimination in America in the early to the middle of 20th century and it takesas the consideration of the writer who has to know about the history of social condition in America in 20thcentury. By the reason, the writer applies socio-historical approach as the theory to analyze Langston Hughes poem. Socio-historical approach is an approach applied in identifying the social, cultural, political, religious and historical dynamics that are embodied (Kardiansyah, 2019; Kardiansyah & Salam, 2021). This definition also refers to social and history. It is clear that social condition which had already happened in the past can be analyzed by using this approach.

Since the issue inside the poem deals with the individual life and society, in which both of them have mutual correlation where the individual is part of the society (Al Falaq & Puspita, 2021; Mertania & Amelia, 2020; Sujatna et al., 2020). Besides that, the conditions of individuals such as physical, economic things, thingsspiritual, or social are influenced by society. For this reason, the writer applies the socio-historical approach for this analysis. Socio historical approach is analyzing literary work which emphasizes the literary work that has relationship with the historical of social event". Langston Hughes poem revealing America racial discrimination in 20th century had already happened in the past; therefore, it can be categorized as part of history. Yudhoyono further states that literary work revealed social life, it can be analyzed from many ways. It means that analyzing the poems by Langston, the writer can correlate the topic of this thesis with social events in the past time. Based on those definitions, the writer concludes that Langston Poems entitled "I, Too"1921-1930, "Laughers" 1921-1930and "Merry Go-Round" 1941-1950 can be analyzed by using socio-historical approach because those three poem is becoming the genre of literature which contains socio-historical facts. Therefore, the purpose of this approach in this thesis is to dig out the issue of the topic discussed.

# **Racial Discrimination in 20th Century**

In 1619, a Dutch's ship brought 20 Africans ashore at the British colony of Jamestown, Virginia, slavery spread throughout the American colonies". It indicates that before 20th century, many Africans became the slaves and it builds the prejudice that black people were uncivilized and uneducated well. Then, the issue of black people continued until 20th century and there were some fields of discrimination done by white people such as in public facilities, employment and education.

# **Public Facilities**

In 1906 they (Negro) were either excluded from railway cars, omnibuses, stagecoaches, and steamboats or assigned to special "Jim Crow" sections; they sat, when permitted, in secluded and remote corners of theaters and lecture halls; they could not enter most hotels, restaurants, and resorts, except as servants; they prayed in "Negro pews" in the white churches (D Apriyanti et al., 2014; Febrian et al., 2021). Moreover, they were often educated in segregated schools, punished in segregated prisons, nursed in segregated hospitals, and buried in segregated cemeteries.

# **Employment**

In the 1900s, 2.7 percent of black men held skilled white-collar jobs, compared with 16.3of white men (Nur, 2021; Qomariah & Sucipto, 2021). Then in 1910, the number of white-collar job proportion increase to 20.0 percent for white men and 2,3 percent for black men. The black proportion increased to 3.7 percent in 1940 but the increase in the white proportion was larger, it became 25.8 percent in 1940".

Based on the quotation above, the percentage of white-collar worker for black people were far fewer than white people. It means that, in the early twentieth century the number of white-collar workers was dominated by white people. Meanwhile, black people became the majority in the case of having the kind of lower class jobs.

#### **Poetic Devices**

There some branches of poetic devices such as imagery and figurative language (Puspita & Pranoto, 2021; Rahmania & Mandasari, 2021). These two devices can help the writer to analyze the poems but in this thesis the writer will focus only on five figurative languages, those are allusion, irony, personification, metaphor and metonymy. Then the writer will focus on two imageries, they are auditory and visual imagery. The reason is because from all poems the writer had already read and analyzed mostly use figurative language and imagery devices (Nuraziza et al., 2021; Oktavia & Suprayogi, 2021).

#### **METHOD**

In this research the writer applied library research and descriptive qualitative research. Library research as the method of collecting and reading the data was needed to conduct this research. Library research is the research and depth collection of material on one or several subjects. By using this method, the writer would get more understanding and find more information in order to conduct the analysis. Moreover, the writer would find the data and information from e-book, journal, thesis, articles and many other resources that were related to the research. Then, the writer applied descriptive qualitative research. Qualitative research is concerned with qualitative phenomenon involving quality. Someof the characteristics of qualitative research or method; It is non-numerical, descriptive, applies reasoning and uses words, Its aim is to get the meaning, feeling and describe the situation (Fithratullah, 2019; Utami et al., 2021). Data collection begins after a research problem has been defined. Next deciding about the method of data collection to be used for the study, there are two types of data; primary and secondary. The primary data are those which are collected afresh and for the first time, and thus happen to be original in character (Aminatun et al., 2021; Dian Apriyanti & Ayu, 2020; Puspita et al., 2021). The secondary data, on the other hand, are those which have already been collected by someone else and which have already been passed through the statistical processs. The primary data used by the writer were the poems entitled "I, Too" 1921-1930, "Laughers" 1921-1930 and "Merry Go-Round" 1941-1950created by Langston Hughes. Therefore, the data in this research were in form of phrase and the line as a part of stanza about the racial discrimination in the early to the middle of 20th century existing inside the poem.

# RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Racial Discrimination in "I, Too"

#### - Racial Discrimination in Employment

Hughes wrote "I, Too" while stranded in Genoa, Italy, after his passport and wallet were stolen. Genoa had a busy port and Hughes tried to catch a ride back to America as a deckhand, but no ship would take him. After watching several white men easily get rides and it inspiring him to write "I, Too" and mailed it to New York, hoping to sell the poem and make some money. Then, in this poem, Hughes depicts the discrimination in employment and it can be seen from the stanza below:

I, too, sing America...

I am the darker brother. 1st They send me to eat in the kitchen2nd When company comes,3rd But I laugh, 4th And eat well, 5th And grow strong.6th (I, Too, line 1-6)

In the first line, "I, too sing America", Hughes tried to state that he was also an American by saying that he also sang the same national anthem of America. Then, the writer found "metaphor" in the second line "I am the darker brother". This line referred to metaphor because it showed direct relationship where one thing or idea substitutes for another which is introduced by to be and those thing have implicit or hidden comparison between two unrelated things but sharing some common characteristics.

In this case, the speaker stated that he was the darker brother. It means that "I" and "darker brother" had the some common characteristic. "I am" referred to the speaker, that was Hughes, and the common characteristic of "dark" from the phrase "darker brother" which was nearer to the black. Hughes was identified as the black, because he had the dark skin. Then, the use of the word brother is not intended to be read as the literal brother but to depict that symbolically as all men of Americans are united as one. Furthermore, the lines"I, too sing America, I am the darker brother"depicted that Hughes as the speaker was also an American but he had the difference with other race in America, that was "black skin".

Then Hughes continues by writing, "They send me to eat in the kitchen, when company comes". In this line Hughes used the word "they" which referred to white people, because if people who came were black people, he would not asked to eat in the kitchen. In this case, the word they and company referred to the group of people who work together and they are identified as white people. Those lines depict the discrimination in employment. It can be seen from "They send me to eat in the kitchen", from this line Hughes depict that he got unequal treatment because he asked to eat in the kitchen by the company. Furthermore, as American Hughes had the right to eat in the proper place, but here the word kitchen depicted that Hughes as black have to get unequal treatment because he should be separated with white people. So, this line depict that Hughes got the discrimination in employment because the company treat him unequally.

# Racial Discrimination in "Laughers" -Racial Discrimination in Employment

Early 20<sup>th</sup>century was hard time for blacks to get a job. The number of white-collar workers was dominated by white people. Meanwhile, black people became the minority in the case of having kind of lower class jobs. Then, in 1900s black people were labored as cooks, maids, nurses of baby, elevator boys and the like. Besides that, black opened their own business and others established their own amusement, lodging and entertainment. So that, many of them became the entertainers in their own business. All of the jobs mentioned referred to lower class occupations with low wages.

This discrimination depicted in the poem of Laughers below:

My people. 1<sup>st</sup> Dish-washers,2<sup>nd</sup> Elevator-boys, 3<sup>rd</sup>

Ladies' maids, 4<sup>th</sup>
Crap-shooters, 5<sup>th</sup>
Cooks, 6<sup>th</sup>
Waiters, 7<sup>th</sup>
Jazzers, 8<sup>th</sup>
Nurses of babies, 9<sup>th</sup>
Loaders of ships,10<sup>th</sup>
Rounders, 11<sup>th</sup>
Number writers, 12<sup>th</sup>
Comedians in vaudeville 13<sup>th</sup>
And band-men in circuses— 14<sup>th</sup>
Dream-singers all,— 15<sup>th</sup>
(*Laughers*, line 5-19)

In the fifth line, Hughes used the phrase "my people" which referred to the equality and relatives of his or someone who had the same characteristic with him. It can be identified as black people or African American because Hughes was known as the prominent of Black people. It can be defined that, by using phrase "my people" Hughes wanted to give the description about people who had the same race with him and what they had been through at that time. So, the phrase "my people" referred to black people.

#### **CONCLUSION**

In this analysis, the writer uses some elements of poem. It is used to find the meaning of words inside the poem. The writer found some figurative language: allusion, irony, personification, metaphor and metonymy. Then, the writer found two imageries: visual imagery and auditory imagery. After that, the writer correlates the poems analysis with the discrimination in twentieth century by using socio-historical approach. Racial discrimination in the early to the middle of 20th century divided into 3 fields those are racial discrimination in public facilities, employment and education. From those three fields, the writer found the discrimination in public facilities and employment inside the three poems being analyzed.

From the first poem I, Too,it contains the issue of racial discrimination in the field of employment. In this poem, the speaker depicts that he has to eat in the kitchen when the company come. It is clearly depicted that, black people have to get unequal treatment because they are not allowed to eat at the same place with white people. In analyzing the poem, the writer found figurative language: metaphor and irony, then two imageries: visual imagery and auditory imagery.

After that, from the second poem that is Laughers, the writer found the depiction of racial discrimination in employment. In this poem, the speaker mention many kinds of lower class occupation that belong to black people, for instance: dish-washers, elevator-boys, ladies' maids, crap-shooters, cooks, waiters, jazzers, nurses of babies, loaders of ships, rounders, number writers, comedians in vaudeville, band-men in circuses, and dream-singers. In this poem the writer found allusion, personification, metonymy and auditory imagery.

Racial discrimination in public facilities found in the third poem Merry Go-round. From the entire lines the speaker depicts that the discrimination happen in the train, bus and also

merry go-round and this discrimination is regulated by the Jim Crow Law. The writer found element of poem which is figurative language: allusion.

Then, by conducting the analysis the writer concludes that the depiction of racial discrimination is exist in the three poems entitled I, Too, Laughers and Merry go-round. Related to those poem Hughes want to show that in the early to the middle of 20th century there is the discrimination in the field of public facilities and employment.

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