

RACIAL DISCRIMINATION IN *THE FIRST GRADER* MOVIE

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Abstract

Racial discrimination is one of the social phenomena that causes intergenerational trauma. The movie becomes one way to picture this reality, as in *The First Grader*. Using content analysis to qualitatively describe the phenomena, the researcher found three levels of racism. The findings show that personalized mediate racism happens the most. The next level of racism that occurs is institutionalized racism and internalized racism. The source of the racism is British colonialism in Kenya and tribalism, which have had lasting effects on the social fabric of the country. The movie effectively portrays how these different levels of racism manifest in everyday life. *The First Grader* serves as a powerful reminder of the ongoing struggle against racial discrimination and the importance of addressing its root causes to prevent further intergenerational trauma.

Keywords: Content Analysis; Racial Discrimination; *The First Grader*

Abstrak

Diskriminasi rasial merupakan salah satu konflik sosial yang menimbulkan trauma antargenerasi. Film menjadi salah satu cara untuk menggambarkan kenyataan ini, seperti dalam *The First Grader*. Dengan menggunakan analisis konten untuk mendeskripsikan fenomena tersebut secara kualitatif, peneliti menemukan tiga tingkatan rasisme. Temuan menunjukkan bahwa rasisme perantara yang dipersonalisasi paling banyak terjadi. Tingkat rasisme berikutnya yang terjadi adalah rasisme yang terlembaga dan rasisme yang terinternalisasi. Sumber rasisme adalah kolonialisme Inggris di Kenya dan tribalisme, yang mempunyai dampak jangka panjang terhadap tatanan sosial di negara tersebut. Film ini secara efektif menggambarkan bagaimana berbagai tingkat rasisme terwujud dalam kehidupan sehari-hari. *The First Grader* berfungsi sebagai pengingat yang kuat akan perjuangan yang sedang berlangsung melawan diskriminasi rasial dan pentingnya mengatasi akar permasalahannya untuk mencegah trauma antargenerasi lebih lanjut.

Kata kunci: Analisis Isi; Diskriminasi Rasial; *The First Grader*

INTRODUCTION

The relationship between literature and movie is complex. Some experts claim that modern novels have been influenced by cinematic techniques, while others argue that they have diverged from movies. Despite their differences, both literature and film share

narrative aspects that are crucial for their impact on the audience (Astiantih, Rahman, & Makka, 2017; Fussalam, Lestari, & Anggelia, 2019; Karlsson, 2010). Movies are often adapted from literary works, showcasing the similarities and differences between the two mediums. Literary works use language as a

medium to express experiences, feelings, and ideas, while movies convey stories through audio and visual elements (see Puspitasari et al, 2021; Hidayati et al, 2022; Sofya & Arifin, 2023).

Movie is considered part of literature in the field of adaptation studies, where adaptations of literary works into movie are analyzed and discussed (Cartmell & Whelehan, 2022). Movie adaptations allow for a different interpretation of the original text. It generally condenses and visually represents the story in a limited time frame. Both movie and literature are always captivating people with their storytelling nature.

Both movie and literature often show real-life events (see Erdianto & Arifin, 2024; Harida et al, 2023; Nuryani et al, 2023). Through both mediums, audiences can gain a deeper understanding of the human experience and the world around them. They can portray the reality of social status (Ismail & Moriyanti, 2019; Pipit, 2015), the social norm (Agustin, 2019), and the social conflict (Octovian, 2015). The social conflict deals with the conflicts that exist between classes, such as the bourgeoisie and the proletariat. These social phenomena include wars and revolutions, wealth and poverty, discrimination, and domestic violence.

Discrimination is a part of social conflict as it involves the production of group status through subordination, leading to competition over social status. Discriminatory norms can hinder economic trades and impact social interactions, ultimately leading to discrimination in various settings (McAdams, 1995). Individuals who feel threatened in terms of status are more likely to exhibit prejudicial attitudes towards minorities, as it allows them to maintain or increase their own status. This plays a significant role in shaping racial attitudes, with those experiencing

changes in status showing more negative attitudes towards minorities (McAdams, 1995). Movie also depicts this reality in their frames.

Selma is a movie that shows three levels of racism: institutionalized racism, personally mediated racism, and internalized racism (Rahmatillah, Kuncara, & Nasrullah, 2020). In the movie *Get Out*, racism is constructed through elements like dialog, characterization, and plot, with stereotypes of discrimination, prejudice, and violence being portrayed (Assidiqi & Hasbi, 2019). *Where's the Money* (2017) also explores racism, highlighting forms such as Pre-reflected Gut Racism, Cultural Racism, and Institutional Racism (Sholihati & Purnama, 2021). Films like 'The Help' directed by Tate Taylor depict acts of racism, discrimination, prejudice, and violence, highlighting the struggles faced by marginalized communities (Padma, Yustitia, & Fatonah, 2020). These films shed light on the pervasive nature of racism in society, showcasing how it permeates various aspects of life and affects individuals in different ways. By portraying these forms of discrimination and prejudice on screen, these movies prompt audiences to reflect on their own beliefs and behaviors, ultimately sparking important conversations about race and inequality.

Levels of racism based on Jones (1997) are categorized into three levels: institutionalized racism, personally mediated racism, and internalized racism (Rahmatillah et al., 2020). Institutionalized racism refers to the policies and practices within social institutions that systematically disadvantage certain racial groups. Personally mediated racism involves discriminatory actions or behaviors by individuals towards others based on their race. Internalized racism occurs when individuals from marginalized racial groups internalize negative stereotypes and beliefs

about their own race, leading to self-hatred and low self-esteem. These three levels of racism work together to perpetuate inequality and discrimination in society.

The First Grader is a movie that talks about a Kenyan man named Kimani Maruge who enrolls in primary school at the age of 84. This film sheds light on the discrimination and prejudice faced by Maruge as an elderly student seeking education, while also showcasing the resilience and determination of the human spirit. Through the use of powerful storytelling and compelling characters, *The First Grader* challenges societal norms and stereotypes, ultimately delivering a message of hope and triumph over adversity.

METHOD

To find out the racism level in *The First Grader* movie, this descriptive qualitative research applies content analysis. Krippendorff and Eriyanto define content analysis as a technique to find out not only how the contents of the text, but also how the message conveyed so that it can see the hidden meaning of a text (Padma et al., 2020). Using the note-taking technique, the dialogues were classified into three levels of racism: institutionalized racism, personally mediated racism, and internalized racism. Miles and Huberman (1994) data interaction analysis play as basis of the findings' description.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

In *The First Grader*, the main character, a Maasai man named Kimani Maruge, faces discrimination and ridicule from his fellow villagers when he decides to enroll in primary school at an old age. As a former Mau Mau' uprising member, Maruge faces additional challenges as he seeks acceptance and redemption in a society.

**Table 1: Level of racism in
*The First Grader***

Level of Racism	Total
Institutionalized racism	6
Personally mediated racism	7
Internalized racism	2

Based on the data, the personally mediated racism is more depicted in the movie than institutionalized racism and internalized racism. The explanation of each level of racism in the movie is elaborated as follow:

Institutionalized Racism

Institutionalized racism refers to the policies and practices within social institutions that systematically disadvantage certain racial groups. This racism is mostly depicted as the racial discrimination of the Kenyan especially Kikuyu tribes by British government throughout their colonization.

Datum 1 (00:28:09)

British troop : Should I help you to hear a little bit better?

Jane : Like this, Maruge. Maruge? Let's get you some air.

This datum shows institutionalized racism towards Maruge during his day as Mau Mau fighter. British troops used sharpen pencil tip to hurt him and prevent him from hearing properly, demonstrating the dehumanization and cruelty Maruge faced. This mistreatment highlights the systemic discrimination and violence inflicted upon individuals fighting for independence in Kenya during that time period.

Datum 2 (00:42:22)

Jane : The British killed his family. We have a duty to help him.

Jane's husband : The Mau Mau killed people too, OK?

Jane : But that's got nothing to do with an old man going to a children's school.

This conversation shows institutionalized racism towards Maruge as former Mau Mau fighter. The Mau Mau killed people to fight against British colonial rule and oppression, while Maruge's desire to attend school represents a peaceful pursuit of education and knowledge. This contrast underscores the complexities of Kenya's struggle for independence and the different perspectives on resistance during that tumultuous period.

Datum 3 (00: 51:46)

Reporter : Mr. Maruge, why didn't you go to school when you were younger?

Jane : There was no free education for black people when Maruge was a boy.

This dialogue shows the systemic barriers and discrimination that Maruge faced as a black individual seeking education in colonial Kenya. It highlights the historical injustices and inequalities that shaped his life experiences and his determination to overcome them through education.

Datum 4 (00:58:58)

British troop1: Ask her, is this her husband?

British troop2 : Ask her, Kikuyu?

British troop1 : Take the child off her. Take this baby off her.

This dialogue happened when the colonial British troops were looking for Mau Mau rebellion members. They assumed that any Kikuyu woman with a child must be affiliated with the rebellion, showing the racial profiling and discrimination that was rampant during that time. The immediate decision to separate the mother from her child without

any proof or justification is a cruel example of the dehumanization and violence that was inflicted upon the indigenous people of Kenya. This interaction further demonstrates the oppressive and unjust nature of British colonial rule in Kenya.

Datum 5 (01:27:58)

Maruge : I was in the detention camps with our founding fathers. These men sacrificed everything for your generation. Without them, you'd not be here. Before, it was only the Queen's face there. The British did this to me. They cracked my skull. They chopped off my toes.

Chairs Board : Mr. Chairman...

Mr. Chairman: Mr. Maruge, that's enough.

Maruge : We have to learn from our past. We must not forget. But we must be better. We need good teachers. We reap what we sow with our children. Bring her back. Thank you.

The dialogue happened in Kenya's Education Board meeting, where Maruge, a survivor of the Mau Mau uprising, passionately shared his experiences and the importance of learning from history. As British colonial subjects, Maruge and many others suffered brutal treatment at the hands of the British, and he was determined to ensure that future generations would not forget the atrocities that took place. His plea for better education and the return of a lost teacher reflected his belief that only through understanding the past could they build a brighter future. The

emotional speech left a lasting impact on all those present, reminding them of the power of education and the importance of never repeating the mistakes of the past.

Datum 6 (01:34:12)

Jane : You read it for Maruge. Sit down, Maruge.

Alfred : "Dear honoured prisoner number 4339, "On behalf of the Republic of Kenya "I would like to inform you that you have been judged eligible for compensation "for the ill-treatment you endured while imprisoned under British colonial rule "in Hola camp from 1951 to 1953, "Langata camp from 1953 to 1955..."...Manyani camp from 1955 to 1957, "and Embakasi camp from 1957 to 1959." "It is recorded hereby that prisoner number 4339 "suffered cruel and inhuman treatment in captivity "because of his sustained refusal to renounce the oath of allegiance. "With gratitude for your heroic sacrifice in liberating our country, "His Excellency, the President of the Republic of Kenya."

The letter read within the previous dialogue showed the brutality of the British colonial government toward those who dared to fight for the independence of Kenya. The physical and psychological torture endured by prisoner number 4339 highlighted the lengths to which the British would go to suppress any form of resistance. The letter from the President of Kenya served as a poignant reminder of the sacrifices made by individuals like prisoner number 4339 in the struggle for liberation.

Personally Mediated Racism

This level of racism involves discriminatory actions or behaviors by individuals towards others based on their race. There are four personally mediated racism by Mr. Kipruto toward Maruge, two personally mediated racism by Maruge toward Mr. Kipruto, and one personally mediated racism by Maruge toward British colonizers.

Datum 7 (00:29:20)

Maruge : It won't happen again.

Jane : What is that?

Maruge : I was in the camps.

Jane : You were Mau Mau?

Maruge : Yes.

The previous dialogue showed personally mediated racism since it involves a conversation between Jane and Maruge. Jane's surprise at Maruge's past involvement highlights the historical context of colonialism and resistance in the country, shedding light on the systemic racism and oppression that many Kenyans experienced during that time.

Datum 8 (00:32:04)

Maruge : I was a prisoner. The British stole our land, so we said they must give it back. They told us to be quiet. So, we spoke very loud. To some, in 1963. That was uhuru. What does 'uhuru' mean? It's 'freedom'

The previous dialogue is related to personally mediated racism since it illustrates the direct impact of colonialism on individuals like Maruge. By sharing his experience as a prisoner fighting for his land, Maruge is highlighting the deep-rooted systemic racism and oppression that existed during the ongoing struggle for Kenya liberation.

Datum 9 (00:38:43)

Jane : Maruge! You do not hit him!

Mr. Kipruto : Honestly, ladies tell me... Kikuyus have mad blood, but their back story's another one. Kikuyus work like stallions. They're very...

Jane : Maruge, stop it! Maruge!

The previous dialogue is related to personally mediated racism since Mr. Kipruto is making derogatory and stereotypical comments about the Kikuyu people, including the implication that they have a violent nature. Jane's reaction to Maruge hitting someone shows her disapproval of his actions and attempts to stop the perpetuation of harmful stereotypes. This interaction highlights how personally mediated racism can manifest in everyday interactions and perpetuate harmful beliefs and behaviors.

Datum 10 (00:40:31)

Maruge : He's a bloody Kalenjin.

Jane : You too, Maruge? You know, after independence, we all became Kenyans.

Maruge : The Kalenjins were loyalists!

Jane : So were my family loyal to the British! So was everybody if they wanted to stay alive! And don't look at me like that. The British never gave people a choice. You were either for them or you were against them, and if you were against them, they killed you.

The previous dialogue is related to personally mediated racism since Maruge is

making assumptions and judgments based on someone's ethnicity (Kalenjin tribe). Jane is trying to challenge Maruge's harmful beliefs by pointing out that after independence, everyone in Kenya should be considered Kenyan regardless of their ethnic background. She also highlights the complexities of colonial history and the ways in which survival often meant aligning with the colonizers. This conversation exemplifies how historical events can still impact present-day interactions and perpetuate harmful attitudes and behaviors.

Datum 11 (00:56:07)

Jane : You know what, Mr. Kipruto? Why don't you just come clean? Is it because Maruge is old or is it because he's Kikuyu that you don't want him here?

Mr. Kipruto : This is not about tribes, Mrs. Obinchi! Who do you think you are, dictating the agenda? You're an employee. You do as I tell you. Now, I'm warning you one last time. He goes to the adult school!

The previous dialogue is related to personally mediated racism since Mr. Kipruto displays discriminatory behavior towards Maruge based on his age and tribe. Jane challenges Mr. Kipruto's actions, highlighting the underlying bias and prejudice at play. Mr. Kipruto's dismissive response and attempt to assert his authority further illustrate the power dynamics at play in perpetuating harmful attitudes and behaviors rooted in racism.

Datum 12 (00:39:57)

Jane : Sir, he fought the British. He was imprisoned in the camps

Mr. Kipruto : Oh, Mau Mau, huh? Typical Kikuyu. I should have known.

Jane : Excuse me? I thought tribalism was over.

Mr. Kipruto : This has nothing to do with tribalism. It's about doing what's right for the school. An old man like him does not belong in a classroom full of children. Now, we'll continue this conversation in the office.

The previous dialogue is related to personally mediated racism since it involves discriminatory attitudes and behaviors towards an individual based on their tribe or ethnicity. Mr. Kipruto's comments reveal his biased views towards the Kikuyu tribe, showing how prejudice can manifest in everyday interactions. By dismissing Jane's concerns and insisting on removing the elderly man from the classroom, Mr. Kipruto demonstrates how power dynamics can be used to uphold discriminatory practices and perpetuate harmful stereotypes.

Datum 13 (00:56:32)

Mr. Kipruto : This Kikuyu government is going to give the Mau Mau compensation money. Compensation for what? For killing their own people?

Jane : Mr. Kipruto.....can't we just put the past behind us?

Mr. Kipruto : The past is always present, Mrs. Obinchi. Never forget that.

The previous dialogue is related to personally mediated racism since it involves Mr. Kipruto dismissing Jane's concerns about the treatment of the elderly man in the classroom based on his ethnicity. Mr. Kipruto's comments about the Kikuyu government and the Mau Mau further highlight his discriminatory attitudes and perpetuation of harmful stereotypes.

Internalized Racism

It occurs when individuals from marginalized racial groups internalize negative stereotypes and beliefs about their own race, leading to self-hatred and low self-esteem.

Datum 14 (00:41:16)

Maruge : I had children. Two children! I had a family! The British killed them. We chose. The Kikuyus chose. And we paid. We paid!

Internalized racism in the previous dialogue is evident as Maruge blames himself and his own people for the loss of his family at the hands of the British. This self-blame reflects a deep-seated belief in the superiority of the colonizers and the inferiority of the colonized. The trauma of colonization has clearly left a lasting impact on Maruge, leading him to internalize these harmful beliefs about himself and his community.

Datum 15 (00:46:29)

Jane : Maruge, you don't have to tell me this.

Maruge : What is Kikuyu without land? The Masai, it's cattle. But for us, it's land. That's why we were fighting. But we are nothing if we cannot read. We are useless. When I was a boy, there was no money for education. I

worked on a white man's farm. Then came the fight for freedom.

Maruge shows internalized racism in his dialogue as he expresses his negative belief in his tribe, the Kikuyu. This belief stems from Kikuyu identity, being tied to land ownership, which was a key factor in the fight for freedom in Kenya. His desire for education highlights the importance of literacy in empowering marginalized communities to break free from oppressive systems. The historical oppression that his community is nothing without education and the ability to read.

The impact of colonization, genocide, missionization, and racism on indigenous populations has deep psychological and social implications. The intertwining of racism and colonialism reflects a complex history of oppression and discrimination that continues to shape societies today (Bastien, Kremer, Kuokkanen, & Vickers, 2003; Frosh, 2013). These historical traumas have resulted in intergenerational trauma and ongoing disparities in health, education, and socioeconomic status among indigenous communities. The legacy of colonization and racism also manifests in the marginalization and erasure of indigenous cultures and languages. Studying racism within film is crucial to understanding the representation of racism and the ethical conditions of its representability. It involves exploring different representational strategies and the models of whiteness constructed in films on slavery and extreme forms of racism. By analyzing how racism is depicted in cinema, we can uncover hidden violence and challenge ordinary discourses on race (Cervulle, 2023). Examining the portrayal of racism in the movie allows a deeper analysis of power dynamics and the perpetuation of stereotypes. This critical

examination can lead to greater awareness and discussion on how racism continues to impact society today.

CONCLUSION

The movie sheds light on the complexities of identity and the importance of self-love and acceptance for Maruge, a Kenyan who continues to fight for his right to education and respect, showing incredible strength and courage in the face of adversity. The long and bloody history of British colonization in Kenya creates racial discrimination, as depicted in *The First Grader*. Personally mediated racism is mostly found in the movie *The First Grader*. This level of racism is generally related to the main character's tribe and background as a Mau Mau fighter. Institutionalized racism in this movie is mostly related to British colonization in Kenya, which affects the educational system and the treatment of indigenous Kenyans like Maruge. Maruge's tribe and background as a Mau Mau fighter become his reasons for internalized racism. British authorities and fellow Kenyans, mistreatment has left a lasting impact on him. This internalized racism causes him to struggle with feelings of shame and unworthiness, despite his determination to receive an education.

The movie highlights the resilience and strength of Maruge in overcoming the systemic and personal challenges of racism in post-colonial Kenya. Despite facing discrimination and obstacles, Maruge's journey highlights the importance of self-love and acceptance in the face of adversity as he continues to fight for his right to education and respect. His story serves as a powerful reminder of the resilience and courage that can be found in embracing one's identity and worth, no matter the challenges that may come. The

other researcher can further explore the other important values in the movie.

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