

EXPLORING JULIA AGUSTINE'S RESPONSES TO OVERCOME RACISM IN ALICE CHILDRESS' WEDDING BAND: A LOVE/HATE STORY IN BLACK AND WHITE

YOANA GITA PRADNYA LENGARI*¹, MONICA ANGGRAENI DEWI²

¹Akademi Maritim Nusantara Cilacap

²Institut Seni Indonesia Yogyakarta

First received: August 19, 2024

Final proof received: November 14, 2024

*Corresponding Author: yoanalengari014@gmail.com

Abstract

This research explores the portrayal of racial discrimination in Alice Childress' 1962 play, "Wedding Band: A Love/Hate Story in Black and White." The story takes place in the segregated South Carolina in the World War I. This research utilizes the sociocultural-historical approach by examining the ways Julia Agustine, the main character of the play, experiences and responds to racial discrimination. The analysis identifies specific racial discrimination Julia faces. The racial discrimination Julia faces can be seen in the form of racial prejudice in the form of refusal of physical contact and helpful gestures based on racial stereotypes; unwanted sexual harassment from a white male character; and the prohibition of interracial marriage with her white boyfriend Herman. Furthermore, the study examines Julia's responses to these challenges. Drawing on her qualities of courage, faith, perseverance, and intelligence, Julia shows resistance through anger, confrontation, and refusal of those who mistreat her. By analyzing Julia's journey, this study aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of the complex nature of racial discrimination and the resilience required to navigate through it.

Keywords: racial discrimination, response, interracial relationship.

INTRODUCTION

The meaning of literature is subjective and varies across individuals. While some view it solely as written text or entertainment, others recognize its deeper significance. Richard Abcarian (1998), emphasizes that reading literature is not always an easy pleasure. He argues that literature demands engagement on linguistic, intellectual, moral, and emotional levels,

suggesting it transcends mere entertainment. According to Suryaman in Nisa et al (2022), literature acts as a mirror reflecting a nation's social and cultural landscape. This cultural heritage should be passed down to younger generations. Literature has a significant transformative power by influencing the characters development of its reader.

Rather than diminishing the value

of language, literature actually expands its meaning. As Widdowson (1999) notes, the term “literature” takes on various interpretations depending on the context. It can encompass both imaginative writings like fiction and academic fields of study. When referring specifically to written works. Literature can be defined as achieving both “aesthetic and moral merit,” exemplified by works considered part of the literary canon or the “great tradition.” Alternatively, it can be understood as writing characterized by “creativity and imagination.” Merriam-Webster similarly defines literature as “writings excelling in form of expression, conveying ideas of enduring or universal significance.”

These definitions highlight the diverse characteristics associated with literature, such as excellence, aesthetics, creativity, imagination, expressiveness, value, and universality. In fulfilling its purpose and conveying its essence, literature inevitably relies on language as its primary tool and medium. Authors use literature as a medium to express their thoughts and experiences, and through this medium, they can connect with readers and share their perspectives on various societal issues.

Literary works often function as reflections of the author’s environment, showcasing social phenomena through different creative forms (Sugihastuti 2007). Additionally, literature offers unique value beyond mere entertainment. It can serve to broaden a reader’s knowledge base and deepen their understanding of the world, often presented in a narrative format for enhanced engagement. This approach allows for the message to be effectively communicated without feeling forced or imposing upon the reader.

It can also be seen that literature serves as a mirror reflecting aspects of our reality, including social issues like gender

and racism. According to Culler (1997) in his book *Literary Theory: A Very Short Introduction*, highlights the potential of literature to function as an “aesthetic object.” Similar to paintings, literary works combine sensory elements (colors, sounds) with deeper ideas, enabling them to bridge the material and spiritual realms.

In Alice Childress’ play, “*Wedding Band: A Love/Hate Story in Black and White*,” the harsh lens is turned on the racially segregated American South. This play serves as a poignant illustration of how societal norms and laws can perpetuate discrimination, fostering an environment of fear and inequality. Utilizing a critical lens, this paper will analyze the ways in which “*Wedding Band*” depicts racial discrimination, examining how language, symbolism, and character interactions reveal the disturbing nature of systemic oppression.

Wedding Band: A Love/Hate Story in Black and White,” set in the Jim Crow era South, offers an example of the devastating consequences of racial discrimination, particularly as they impact the forbidden love between Julia Augustine, a black woman, and Herman, a white man. This paper will explore how the play exposes the systemic and interpersonal manifestations of racial discrimination, exploring its impact on individuals and the community as a whole.

Through examining the portrayal of racial discrimination in the play, this analysis aims to uncover the racial discrimination experienced by Julia Augustine and the ways she reacts to the discriminatory practices she comes across in the play. Alice Childress’ play *Wedding Band: A Love/Hate Story in Black and White*,” serves as a valuable resource for this exploration, as it explicitly studies how Julia faces these challenges. The play serves as a compelling case study, providing examples of how black

character responds to the reality of racial discrimination.

Racial discrimination refers to treating individuals differently based on socially constructed categories like eye shape, skin color, and head shape. These differential actions stem from societal bias and prejudice. Racism is an organized system of oppression built on the false idea that certain races are inferior. This harmful belief allows the dominant racial group to justify controlling resources and opportunities, leaving other races systematically disadvantaged and marginalized (Bonilla-Silva 1997). According to Bailey et al (2017), even when individuals don't harbor explicit racial bias, the legacy of racism can continue discrimination through existing policies and systems within government and institutions. Some forms of racial discrimination that can be seen in society are racial prejudice, sexual harassment, and prohibition of interracial marriage.

Racial prejudice occurs because of a grouping of people into several racial groups conducted by people. This categorization happens because people feel the need to define their identities in relation to these constructed racial groups. It doesn't happen spontaneously or something that is inevitable but rather a result of experience (Blummer, 1958). According to Black and Solomos (2001), those who believe in racial differences aren't going to stop at a certain point. They often promote the idea of racial superiority, suggesting a singular value system that allows them to make universal judgements based on race, ignoring individual complexities.

According to Pincus (1996), the terms dominant group and minority group describe social power relationships rather than simply population size. A dominant group holds the most influence and resources within a society, while a minority

group has less power and may experience discrimination. In the United States, white men have historically held a position of dominance, while people of colour have been considered minority groups.

Furthermore, Blummer (1958) stated that there are four basic feelings that is felt by the dominant group that always exist in racial prejudice, such as the feeling of superiority, the feeling of differentiation and alienation of the subordinate group, the feeling of proprietary claim, and the feeling that the dominant race are threatened that the subordinate race will replace their position.

Other form of racial discrimination is sexual harassment. In 20th century setting, sexual harassment against black community was spreading. According to Giddings (1984), working class black women were particularly vulnerable to sexual exploitation by upper-class men. Davis (1984) states that white abuser who exploit black women has been a daily drama of racism. White men are convinced that what they do to black women are as should be. Botham (2009) adopted a deeply racist and misogynistic ideology, claiming that black girls and women were undeserving of protection and existed solely for the sexual gratification of men. This harmful view harshly illustrates the dehumanization and violence black women have historically faced.

In terms of sexual abuse response, Baker (2008) states that women reacted to sexual coercion in various ways. While some sadly submitted, others resisted, some escaped, some sought help via official channels, and others united in protests against this abuse. From this statement, we can see that women exhibit diverse responses to sexual harassment.

The depiction of prohibition of interracial marriage can be considered as one of the forms of racial discrimination.

During the 19th century, approximately 38 states prohibited interracial marriages. In the period of the Civil War, 9 states revoke their statutes. Yet through the years, Southern states make their laws harsher (Sollors, 2000). Furthermore, Botham (2009) states that the United States is one of few countries that restrict and prohibit interracial marriage by law. Around the 1717s in South Carolina, white and colored people weren't allowed to get married. If violated, the couple will be charged to seven years in prison.

From previous researches about racism, Umami (2020) in her research entitled "Racial Discrimination as the Consequence of Racial Prejudice Portrayed in Jodi Picoult's *Small Great Things*" conclude that racial prejudice will further create racial discrimination. These repeated events indicate that there is a vicious circle in the relationship between racial prejudice and racial discrimination. Knowing that racial prejudice can cause racial discrimination, it must be eliminated. Alsamrai (2022) in her research emphasize that women of two colours in the same society face oppressions and struggle with social traditions. It is showed the image of the black woman who lives in an interracial society and how she faces different types of oppression by marrying a white man. While this paper shows the racial discrimination that Julia faces and how she responds to that oppression.

METHOD

This is qualitative research, with the main characteristic of a qualitative research according to Creswell (2007) is understanding, explaining, exploring of values or messages, people's experience, discovering, and clarifying situation. The types of data used in this research is document analysis. Most qualitative research occurs in settings

documented in various ways such as materials, texts, and others (Coffey 2014).

According to Coffey (2014), in qualitative research, most of them occurs in documented settings. These documents can be materials, texts, or even printed media like books and novels, as long as they offer details about setting, participants, time period, and live experiences. This emphasizes the nature of documents in everyday life – they are constantly written, used, stored, and shared.

The object of the study is Alice Childress' 1962 play, "Wedding Band: A Love/Hate Story in Black and White." Set in South Carolina during World War I, the play centers on an interracial love affair challenged by the harsh realities of racial prejudice.

The sociocultural-historical approach is employed in analyzing this play, as expressed by Rohrberger and Woods, Jr (1971), understanding a literary work requires examining it within the context of the civilization that produced it. A civilization is defined by the shared attitudes and actions of its people, and literature itself reflects these characteristics. In other words, literature arises from and reflects the social and historical context of its creation.

Holman and Harmon (1986) define the sociocultural-historical approach as analyzing literature within the social, cultural and historical context of its creation and publication, as well as the author's background. In this case, the researcher employs this approach to explore into the historical context of South Carolina during the play's setting, specifically focusing on the issues the characters face.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The main goal of the analysis aims to explore how Julia Augustine reacts to the racial discrimination she faces. Julia, a black

woman, is chosen as the focus of this study because the researcher wants to understand the experiences and responses of a character that directly targeted by prejudice.

By examining Julia's character in the play, the analysis will identify the specific discriminatory practices she encounters. Ultimately, this exploration seeks to reveal both forms of racial discrimination that Julia experiences and ways she navigates around them.

The practices of racial discrimination towards Julia Augustine can be seen in the form of racial prejudice, sexual harassment, and also prohibition of interracial marriage.

Racial Discrimination Faced by Julia Augustine

One of the forms of racial discrimination that Julia faces is racial prejudice, it can be seen in the dialogue when Herman's sister Annabelle refuse to let Julia help her in taking care of Herman because she doesn't trust a black woman.

ANNABELLE. Dammit, hush. Hush this noise. Sick or not sick, hush! It's ugliness [to JULIA]. Let me take care of him, please, leave us alone. JULIA. I'll get Greenlee. ANNABELLE. No! Do you hear me? No. JULIA. I'll be outside (p.846)

We can see that in the dialogue, Annabelle forbids Julia to take care of Herman. In her opinion, because she's black, Julia doesn't know how to take care of people. In the dialogue, Julia straightly goes outside to avoid arguments with Annabelle.

Another depiction of racial prejudice can be seen when Annabelle doesn't want Julia to touch her when she spills some water.

JULIA. [Pours a glass of water for her]. Well, this is more than sickness. It's not knowin' 'bout other things. ANNABELLE. We've known for years. He is away all

the time and when old Uncle Greenlee... He's colored gentleman who works in our neighborhood... and he said... he told... er, well, people do talk [ANNABELLE spills water, JULIA attempts to wipe the water from her dress]. Don't do that... It's all right (p.845).

Building on the established social norm that whites wouldn't shake hands with blacks (Thernstorm 1997), Annabelle, a white woman, refuse any physical contact with Julia, a black character. Even though Julia doesn't initiate a handshake, Annabelle's apprehension is evident when Julia simply tries to wipe water off her dress. This reaction stems from the rooted prejudice of the time, where a touch could be interpreted as suggestion of equality. Annabelle stereotypes Julia, assuming all black people hold a lower social status, and thus rejects her attempt at helpfulness. Julia's action, however, is one of simple courtesy, highlighting the racial tension that fills their interaction.

Sexual harassment is also another layer of racial discrimination that Julia Augustin faces. As discussed earlier, Baker (2008) defines sexual harassment as unwanted sexual advances, comments, or physical contact. One of the examples of sexual harassment Julia encounters is when the white Bell Man preys on Julia, attempting to coerce her into intimacy.

THE BELL MAN. Old country boy, that's me! Strong and healthy country boy... [not noticing any rejection]. Sister, um in need for like I never been before. Will you 'commodate me? Straighten me, fix me up, will you? Wouldn't take but five minutes. Um quick like a jack rabbit. Wouldn't nobody know bout you and me. [She backs away from him as he pants and wheezes out his admiration] Um clean, too. Clean as the...Board – a health. Don't belie-

ve in dippin' into everything. I got no money now, but Ladies always need stockin's (p. 829).

The Bell Man's dialogue clearly demonstrates sexual harassment towards Julia. His suggestive phrase, "will you 'commodate me?'" (Childress, 1973), is a thinly veiled attempt at seduction. As Davis (1984) suggests, white men in position of power may view their advances towards black women as acceptable. The Bell Man's behavior reflects this belief, treating Julia as if she deserves such treatment solely based on her race. However, Julia displays strength and agency by refusing his advances and forcefully dismissing him. His regret likely stems from the realization that his expectation of easy gratification was misplaced.

Julia also encounters racial discrimination in the form of laws prohibiting interracial marriage. Despite their ten-year relationship and desire to build a family together, their marriage is forbidden by societal norms and legal restrictions. This frustration can be reflected in some of Julia's utterances throughout the play.

JULIA. Miss Lula, please don't ... you know it's against the law for black and white to get married, so Gawd nor the tea leaves can help us. My friend is white and that's why I try to stay myself (p. 832).

Julia's utterance above highlighted a significant obstacle in Julia and Herman's relationship. Julia considered their situation impossible. She was torn between her desire for a life together and pressures enforced by the law, she wrestles with a difficult choice since leaving Herman would cause her pain, but staying feels unbearable due to legal barrier that obstruct their future.

Julia's Responses towards Racial Prejudice

The play introduces Julia as a woman

who despite receiving only an elementary education (up to eight grade), has a unique perspective on the racial discrimination in her neighborhood. Her formal education, although it's limited, empowers her to challenge these practices in different way. This section will explore into Julia Augustine's responses to racial prejudice. Julia possesses faith, intelligence, courage, and perseverance quality. These quality shape Julia's stance against racial discrimination.

In facing racial prejudice, Julia has zero tolerance for people who discriminate her. The disapproval of her relationship with Herman because of their race difference really causes her frustration. She feels exhausted by the judgement, she responds the treatment with anger. From this dialogue, it can be seen that Julia's anger explode when Herman's mother demanding to take his son back.

HERMAN'S MOTHER. Nigger whore... he used you for a garbage pail... JULIA. White trash! Sharecropper! Let him die... let 'em all die ... Kill him with your murderin' mouth – sharecropper bitch! HERMAN'S MOTHER. Dirty black nigger... JULIA. If i wasn't black with all – a Carolina 'gaints me I'd be mistress of your house! [To Annabelle.] Annabell, you'd be married livin' in Brooklyn, New York ... [To HERMAN'S MOTHER.] ... and I'd be waitin' on Frieda... cookin' your meals ... waterin' that damn red white and blue garden! HERMAN'S MOTHER. Dirty black bitch. JULIA. Daughter of a bitch! (p. 854)

The dialogue above reveals Julia's breaking point from years of suffering in her relationship with Herman. Herman's mother calls her various kinds of condescending mockery and prejudice of her race and skin color. However, Julia responds it by reciprocating her insult and anger to Herman's mother.

Furthermore, in dealing with sexual harassment she encounters with the Bell Man, Julia responds with rejection and anger. She confronted The Bell Man and bravely insisted for him to leave the property.

JULIA. [Trying to keep her voice down, throws money at his feet.] Get out of my house! Beneath contempt, that's what you are. THE BELL MAN. Don't be lookin' down your nose at me... actin' like you Mrs. Martha Washington... Throwin' one chicken – shit dollar at me and goin' on... JULIA. [Picking up wooden clothes hanger.] Get out! Out, before I stick to you (p. 829).

According to Baker (2008), there are various responses from women who encounters sexual harassment, such as resistance, submission, and escape the situation. In this case, Julia shows resistance against her perpetrator. She doesn't hesitate to face her assailant by threaten to hurt him.

Julia's resilience is tested when confronted by deliberate act of prohibition of interracial marriage by Herman's mother. This act, which views Julia as inferior due to her race, raise her anger. To respond this action by her white in-laws, in this case Herman's mother, Julia expresses strong disapproval and firmly rejects that treatment. The following dialogue illustrates her response.

JULIA. Out! Out! Out! And take the last ten years – a my life with you and... when he gets better... keep him home. Killers, murderers... Kinsmens! Klansmens! Keep him home. [To MATTIE.] Name and protection... he can't give me either one. [To LULA.] I'm gon' get down on my knees and scrub where they walked... what they touched... [To MATTIE.] ... with brown soap... hot lye – water... scaldin' hot... [She dashes into the house and collects an armful of bedding...] Clean!... Clean the whiteness outa my house... clean everything...

even the memory... no more love... Free... free to hate – cha for the rest of my life. [Back to the porch with her arms full.] When I die I'm gonna keep on hatin'... I don't want any whiteness in my house. Stay out... out... [Dumps the things in the yard.] ... out ... out... out... and leave me to my black self! (p. 854).

The above dialogue shows Julia's breaking points from years of silent suffering and her unwavering love for Herman. She finally breaks out in a form of rebelliousness. She no longer willing to endure mistreatment, she proclaims her dignity and expels Herman, his mother, and Annabelle from her house, demanding to be left alone. Julia refuses to tolerate those who discriminate her constantly. In this case, she's frustrated by Herman's mother treatment toward Julia and Herman's relationship, she finally has enough and let them go.

CONCLUSION

The analysis of Julia Augustine's character in *Wedding Band: A Love/Hate Story in Black and White*,” serves as evidence to the power of literature to reflect social issues. Julia's experiences highlight the nature of racial discrimination. The analysis of this research determines the types of racial discrimination Julia faces and how she responds to those challenges.

In terms of the form of racial discrimination that Julia faces, it can be seen from the play that she experiences racial prejudice when her sister-in-law Anabelle refuses Julia's help because she's black. She also experiences sexual harassment from The Bell Man that consider Julia as a woman that can be used for sex because of her race, and the most significant discrimination that she experiences prohibition of interracial marriage since her relationship with her long-time white boyfriend, Herman, is forbidden by his mother.

Furthermore, in facing those discrimination, it can be seen that Julia's response to navigate these challenges is fueled by courage, intelligent, faith, and perseverance. When faced with prejudice, sexual harassment, and prohibition for interracial marriage, she displays zero tolerance, refusing to be judged or belittled based on her race.

Eventually, Julia's story serves as a powerful reminder to human's ability to overcome difficulties. By examining her experience in the play, we gain deeper understanding to the complexity of racial discrimination and the courage to confront it.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The researcher's deepest appreciation goes to Akademi Maritim Nusantara for the support in completing this paper and to Ibu Monica Anggraeni Dewi for the cooperation along the process of this publication.

REFERENCES

- Abcarian, R., Klotz, M.; Richardson, P. (1998). *Literature: Reading and Writing the Human Experience*. New York: St. Martin Press.
- Alsamrai, A. Q. H. A.. (2022). "Racism in Wedding Band: A Love/Hate Story in Black and White." *Jurnal Internasional Tasnim Untuk Ilmu Humaniora, Sosial, Dan Hukum* (2).
- Bailey, ZD., Krieger N., Agénor M., Graves J; Linos N; Bassett MT. (2017). "Structural Racism and Health Inequities in the USA: Evidence and Interventions." *The Lancet* 389:1453–63.
- Baker, C. N. (2008). *The Women's Movement Against Sexual Harassment*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Black, L. & Solomos, J. (2001). *Theories of Race and Racism*. Taylor & Francis e-Library.
- Blummer, H. 1958. "Race Prejudice as a Sense of Group Position." *The Pacific Sociological Preview* 1(1):3–7.
- Bonilla-Silva, E. (1997). "Rethinking Racism: Toward a Structural Interpretation." *American Sociological Review* 465–80.
- Botham, F. (2009). *Almighty God Created Races: Christianity, Interracial Marriage, and American Law*. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina.
- Childress, A. (1973). *Wedding Band: A Love/Hate Story in Black and White*. Michigan: French.
- Coffey, A. (2014). *Analyzing Documents*. In U. Flick (Ed.), *The Sage Handbook of Qualitative Data Analysis*. SAGE Publications Ltd.
- Creswell, J. W. (2007). *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing Among Five Approaches (2nd Ed.)*. SAGE Publications, inc.
- Culler, J. (1997). *Literary Theory: A Very Short Introduction*. New York: Oxford University Press Inc.
- Davis, A. Y. (1984). *Women, Race, and Class*. New York: Random House.
- Giddings, P. (1984). *When and Where I Enter*. New York: Quill William Morrow.
- Holman, H. C. & Willia, H. (1986). *A Handbook to Literature Fifth Edition*. New York: Macmillan Publishing Company.
- Nisa, H. T., Muhid, A., Heriyanto, E. (2022). "Desmond Doss' Biblical Determination to Defend His Faith in The Hacksaw Ridge Movie." *Philosophica: Jurnal Bahasa, Sastra, Dan Budaya* 5(2):58–70.
- Pincus, F. L. (1996). "Discrimination Comes in Many Forms: Individual, Institutional, and Structural." *The American Behavioral Scientist* 40(2).
- Rohrberger, M. & Samuel H. Woods, Jr. (1971). *Reading and Writing about Lit-*

- erature*. New York: Random House, Inc.
- Sollors, W. (2000). *Interracialism: Black–White Intermarriage in American History, Literature, and Law*. New York: Oxford University Press, Inc.
- Sugihastuti. (2007). *Teori Apresiasi Sastra*. Jogjakarta: Pustaka Pelajar.
- Thernstorm, S. & Thernstorm, A. (1997). *America in Black and White One Nation*. New York: Touchstone Rockefeller Center.
- Umami. (2020). “Racial Discrimination as the Consequence of Racial Prejudice Portrayed in Jodi Picoult’s *Small Great Things*.” Universitas Negeri Semarang.
- Widdowson, H. G. (1999). “Positions and Perspectives: A Partial Response.” *International Journal of Applied Linguistics* 9(1).