

Identifying Racism and Racial Stereotypes in Rainbow Rowell's *Eleanor And Park*

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Abstract

The study aims to identify racism and racial stereotype in text structure, social cognition, and social context of Rainbow Rowell's *Eleanor and Park*. The study uses qualitative descriptive design and conducts Teun A. van Dijk's socio-cognitive approach to analyze words, phrases and sentences which contain racism and racial stereotype in *Eleanor & Park*. The result shows that racism in *Eleanor and Park* novel are in the form of implicit, explicit, internalized racism, and fetishism of Asian. The racial stereotypes in the novel are the stereotypes of Asian physical features, namely the description of a short body, slanted eyes, weak and helpless appearances, and also the use of the word "doll" to describe Asian women. The cause of racism and racial stereotypes in the novel are triggered by the inequality of access and power, lack of awareness about racial issues faced by Asian communities in western countries, and the development of the term "Model Minority" which makes an illusion that Asian community are privileged.

Keywords: socio-cognitive approach, text dimension, social cognition dimension, social context dimension



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Mengidentifikasi Rasisme dan Stereotip Rasial dalam *Eleanor And Park* Karya Rainbow Rowell

Abstrak

Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengidentifikasi rasisme dan stereotip rasial dalam struktur teks, kognisi sosial, dan konteks sosial dalam novel “Eleanor and Park” karya Rainbow Rowell. Penelitian ini menggunakan desain deskriptif kualitatif dan melakukan pendekatan sosio-kognitif Teun A. van Dijk untuk menganalisis kata, frasa, dan kalimat yang mengandung rasisme dan stereotip rasial dalam novel Eleanor & Park. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa rasisme muncul bentuk implisit, eksplisit, rasisme terinternalisasi, dan fetishisme orang Asia. Stereotip rasial dalam novel tersebut adalah stereotip ciri fisik orang Asia, yaitu gambaran tubuh yang pendek, mata sipit, penampilan yang lemah dan tidak berdaya, serta penggunaan kata “boneka” untuk menggambarkan wanita Asia. Penyebab rasisme dan stereotip rasial dalam novel tersebut dipicu oleh ketimpangan akses dan kekuasaan, kurangnya kesadaran akan isu-isu rasial yang dihadapi masyarakat Asia di negara-negara barat, dan berkembangnya istilah “Model Minority” yang membuat ilusi bahwa Asia masyarakat diistimewakan.

Kata kunci: dimensi kognisi sosial, dimensi konteks sosial, dimensi teks, pendekatan sosio-kognitif

INTRODUCTION

Every human being has their physical characteristic that are different and unique, such as their skin color, hair shape, face shape, and others. This physical characteristic will lead to an understanding of race or racial group. Schaefer (2013, p. 229) described racial group as “a group that is set apart from others because of physical differences that have taken on social significance.” There is no human being can choose from which family, racial group, or nation they were born.

Grouping people based on their race can create a tendency to draw a line between “us” versus “them”. When the line getting thicker, people start creating prejudices and stereotypes about other racial groups to differentiate between social groups and discriminate against others. Racial stereotyping is generalizing a certain group of people or culture based on uncertain belief. Stereotyping is actually a natural process, but it is dangerous since it leads us to gather misleading information, especially when it comes to race. Stereotypes has a lot of impact on our society. It traps us to exclude facts that challenge our beliefs, deny the existence of those that do not fit the assumptions, even influence our act based on what people generally think about our group (Nguyen-

Phuong-Mai, 2017, p.5). Thus, from that statement, we get an understanding that racial classification has the potential to create discrimination, especially when it involves assumption about their physical, moral, intellectual, spiritual, and others.

Racism is the product of racial prejudices and stereotypes. Wilson (1999, p. 14) defines racism as an “ideology of racial domination,” which is the belief that a certain race (the minority) is biologically and culturally inferior to the dominant race. However, besides the common society, racism and racial stereotypes are also raised by the government and the media since they have power to influence the society. Van Dijk (1993, p. 100) argues that the practice of social power requires (more or less legitimate or illegitimate) social control over others. This control applies to the various possible actions and cognitions of others: More powerful actors have a higher potential to influence the behavior and way of thinking of the less powerful.

All of racial issues can be analyzed by exploring the discourse surrounding it. According to Foucault in Weedon (1987, p. 108), “discourses ... are ways of constituting knowledge, together with the social practices, forms of subjectivity and power relations which inhere in such knowledges and the relations between them.” All forms of communication are part of the discourse because it involves the messenger, the recipient, and the meaning within the message. Fowler in Eriyanto (2001, p. 2) stated that discourse is spoken or written communication which is seen from the point of view of the beliefs, values, and categories that fall into it. Belief here represents a world view, an organization or a representation of experiences. Therefore, language in discourse is not neutral because it conveys the producer’s ideology. Darma (2009, p. 129) stated that every discourse has ideology and that ideology later will influence social representation in society.

Discourse can be realized in the form of full essay (books, encyclopedia, newspaper, etc.), sentences, or phrases that carry a complete instruction. One of the medias which has an important role in channelling ideology which cannot be separated from discourse is novel/book.

Eleanor and Park (Rowell, 2012) is a novel written by a White American author, Rainbow Rowell (born February 24, 1973, in Nebraska). The novel has received a lot of criticism from Asian American community due to its problematic characters and controversial narration. The novel is about the love story of two teenagers who came from different background. The male lead character, Park, is a half-Korean, half-White high school student from an upper-middle class family, while the female lead character,

Eleanor is a red-haired girl who grew up in a poor and abusive family. Many readers have pointed out that this novel is spreading blatant racism and racial stereotypes towards Asian-American community, especially East Asian. In addition.

The rise of this issue makes the researcher interest in doing a deeper study for the contents of the novel. By using the model of critical discourse analysis proposed by Van Dijk (Eriyanto, 2001, p. 221), which is commonly known as Socio-cognitive approach, the researcher identify the racism and racial stereotype within the text structure, social cognition, and social context of “Eleanor and Park” novel. Other than that, socio-cognitive approach is very suitable for this study since it aims to dissect how minorities are represented in issues of ethnicity, racism, and refugees, which is all contained in the mentioned novel.

METHOD

This study used the descriptive qualitative approach. Creswell (1994, p. 2) defined qualitative research as a model that is applied in nature and allows the researcher to develop a high level of detail in actual experiences. The data of this research are in the form of sentences and words which contained racism and racial stereotypes. The data source is the novel by Rainbow Rowell entitled *Eleanor & Park* which was published in 2012 by St. Martin’s Press. The selected sentences and words are chosen to be analyzed because not all of the sentences and words in this book contained racism and racial stereotypes.

This research also used library research and internet research to collect and analyze data that are related to this research, either in the form of books, articles, or scientific magazines. According to Zed (2004, p. 1–2), library research utilizes library resources to obtain research data. Zed also emphasized that library research activities are only limited to library collection materials without requiring field research. From this explanation, the researcher collect data through a research library in order to collect data effectively to explore the construction of racist discourse in *Eleanor and Park* novel and analyze how Rainbow Rowell manifest the elements of racism in *Eleanor and Park* novel.

The data collection is using documentation method. These data were collected from the narration and dialogues of Rainbow Rowell’s *Eleanor and Park*. Documentation method is a method of collecting data that are in the form written documents. According to Ary et. al (2014, p. 471), documents are written, physical, and visual materials, including what other authors may term artifacts.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Socio-cognitive approach proposed by Van Dijk claims the relations between discourse and society are cognitively mediated (van Dijk, 2015, p. 64). Van Dijk sees that the cognitive factor is very influential in the process of producing a discourse. There are three dimensions of socio-cognitive approach, namely text structure, social cognition, and social context (Eriyanto, 2001, p. 225).

Text Structure Dimension

Text structure provides a map for studying a text; not only about the content of the text, but also other elements that build the text which are words, sentences, paragraphs, propositions, and so on. Text dimension has three structures, there are macrostructure, superstructure, and microstructure. However, in this research, the researcher does not analyze the superstructure since it is in contradiction with the research method. In text dimension, the focus of the study is on the structure of the text; vocabulary, sentences, propositions, and paragraphs. The text dimension analysis is as follow:

Macrostructure

According to Eriyanto (2001), macrostructure is the global meaning of a text. It is equal to topic, main idea, summary, or the core of the text. After reading the whole novel, the researcher found out that the topic of *Eleanor and Park* novel is **interracial relationship romance**. The novel is telling the love story between two teenagers with different racial backgrounds, namely Eleanor and Park. Eleanor is a redheaded White teenage girl, while Park is a Korean-American teenage boy. At first, their relationship did not go well. Park was forced to give one of his bus seats to Eleanor because he felt guilty to leave her alone (no one on the bus wanted to share a seat with Eleanor). They were avoiding each other. Eleanor was avoiding Park because she could not trust Park. In her opinion Park is a stupid Asian kid. This is the first appearance of racism in this novel.

“...stupid Asian kid...” (Rowell, 2012, p. 12)

Although later Eleanor fell in love with Park, racist thoughts still popping up in Eleanor’s mind, but in a more subtle form. Besides that, Park also experienced internalized racism He thought his Korean side is bad for him. He was feeling inferior by his Korean genes. This feeling of inferiority affected his personality and way of thinking. He did not experience bullying at school. He also had a good friend. However, he remains closeted and did not like to expose himself too much, especially when it comes to something regarding to his Korean side.

Microstructure

Microstructure is the local meaning of a text which can be observed from the choice of words, sentences and styles used in a text. Microstructure consists of four aspects. There are semantics, syntax, stylistics, and rhetoric.

Semantics: Setting

Setting is used to provide a basis to see where the meaning of the text is carried (Eriyanto, 2001, p. 235). Therefore, the setting helps to investigate the intention and purpose of the text producer. Since the data used in this research is a novel, which consists of several chapters, paragraphs, sentences, and words, the setting analysis will be carried out by looking at all the elements in the novel that are interrelated.

Internalized Racism

“My mom’s from Korea. **She just doesn’t talk about it very much.**” (Rowell, 2012, p. 104)

“Maybe **Korean genes scrambled everything.**” (Rowell, 2012, p. 117)

“**Nobody thinks Asian guys are hot,**’ Park said finally.” (Rowell, 2012, p. 272)

“**I don’t even know what it means to be Korean...**’ he said.” (Rowell, 2012, p. 273)

Park stated that his mom did not talk about Korea very much. He blamed the Korean genes for all his weakness and insecurities. And then in, nearing the end of the story, Park confessed that he did not know what it meant to be Korean.

Setting shows where the meaning of the text will be carried by the author. In *Eleanor and Park* novel, the setting showed that the background of Park’s internalized racism is because he does not have a person to explore the idea of being Korean. Rowell brought up the internalized racism problem in the novel, but never solves the problem till the end of the story. According to Eriyanto (2001, p. 235), a text can give a certain effect to the reader. Park’s unsolved problem may make Asian readers who are going through the same thing as Park think they will never stop being racist to themselves.

Semantics: Details

Details related to how the text producer controls what information they want to deliver. A text producer will over-display information that will benefit them and give them

a good image. The detail element is a text producer strategy to express themselves implicitly.

Racial Stereotype of Asian woman

“His mom looked exactly like **a doll**.” (Rowell, 2012, p. 126)

The detail refers to Park’s mother being described as a doll. Asian women are described as cute and doll-like actually started when American military men stationed in Asia brought back to the United States their stereotypes of Asian women (Woan, 2008, p. 292). Using the term “doll” for describing Asian women has been considered as a slur because it relegates her to the realm of childhood and fantasy. On the other hand, the doll also functions as a toy which implies the submissive qualities as doll is considered. In connection with these observations, Asian women in Asia or the United States are often seen as submissive who are willing to please their men. This explanation is sufficient to straighten out that Rowell’s description about Park's mother is harmful for Asian women.

Semantics: Meaning

Meaning is similar to detail. Meaning aims to show information that is beneficial or not for text producers. Beneficial information will usually be described explicitly, while unbeneficial information is usually being explained implicitly.

“And **you make me feel like a cannibal**.” (Rowell, 2012, p. 113)

“I want to eat his face.” (Rowell, 2012, p. 206)

The meaning refers to the active sentence “you make me feel like a cannibal” and “I want to eat his face”. These sentences implicitly put Park in a position of a “prey” and Eleanor as a “predator”. This prey and predator situation showed the racial fetishization against Asian, which is an attraction to someone based on their race and is considered as a form of racism (Chang, 2006, p. 4). Thus, the meaning element in the data above expressed Eleanor’s domination over Park.

Semantics: Presupposition

Presupposition is something the speaker assumes before making an utterance. In CDA, presupposition is analyzed to see how the text producer support their opinions by providing premises they believed to be true (Eriyanto, 2001, p. 256).

“Eleanor **imagined Park’s dad, Tom Selleck, tucking his Dainty China person into his flak jacket and sneaking her out of Korea.**” (Rowell, 2012, p. 126)

The non-factive verb *imagined* triggered non-factive presupposition. Non-factive presupposition is an assumption that something is not to be necessarily true. The word *imagined* denote that the statement was based on opinion. Thus, the data showed Rowell’s opinion about Park’s parents which was delivered through Eleanor’s point of view. Dainty China people used to describe Asian women can give the meaning as if they are weak and fragile because Dainty China people are made of ceramics and are small. As the researcher has elaborated in detail element, giving a weak and fragile quality to Asian women character is the same as using racial stereotype.

Syntaxis: Sentence Form

Sentence form is not just about grammatical correct, but determines the meaning formed through the arrangement of sentences.

“It was like watching Paul Bunyan make out with one of those It’s Small World dolls.” (Rowell, 2012, p. 25)

In data above, the verb phrase refers to “watching Paul Bunyan make out with one of those It’s Small World dolls”. This verb phrase in *Eleanor and Park* novel romanticizes the relationship between Park’s mother (Korean women) and Park’s father (ex-American soldier). From Park’s point of view, Rowell refers Park’s father as Paul Bunyan (a giant lumberjack and folk hero in American and Canadian folklore) kissed Park’s mother as a doll from It’s Small World (a water-based boat ride at Disney theme park which features over 300 audio-animatronic dolls). In the analysis of detail element in semantic aspect, the researcher has elaborated that referring Asian women as doll is inappropriate and harmful for them. The data does not only romanticize Park’s parents’ relationship, but also using racial stereotype to describe a Korean woman.

Syntaxis: Coherence

Coherence is the relationship or interweaving between words, or sentences in the text. There are two kinds of coherence, distinctive coherence and conditional coherence.

“All the women in his family were tiny, and all the man were huge. **Only** Park’s DNA had missed the memo.” (Rowell, 2012, p. 117)

The distinctive coherence refers to the adjective *only*. The adjective *only* emphasized that Park is different from the other men in his family because Park's DNA had missed the memo. By DNA, Rowell meant Park's Korean genes. Park was having internalized racism because he was feeling insecure about his descent. This also showed the racial stereotype that East Asians are small.

Stylistic: Lexicon

Lexicon, or stylistic aspect, signifies how the text producer chooses words from various possible words. The choice of words used can indicate certain attitudes and ideologies (Eriyanto, 2001, p. 255). The following lexicon is found in *Eleanor and Park*:

"She was pretty sure he was Asian... skin the color of the sunshine through **honey**." (Rowell, 2012, p. 53)

"Park's hands were.... **Honey-colored** with..." (Rowell, 2012, p. 58)

"... around his **honey finger**." (Rowell, 2012, p. 81)

Through Eleanor's point of view, Rowell describe Park's skin color as honey, and it did not happen once. The repetition of describing Park's skin as honey shows Rowell is too fixated and exoticized Park's Asian physical feature. 'Honey' is also an alternative way to say yellow, which is a label for Asian that can have racist meaning when uttered by people other than Asian descent.

Rhetoric: Metaphor

Metaphors in the text are used as ornaments or condiments of a text (Eriyanto, 2001, p. 259). Certain metaphors are used by the author to provide a basis for thinking, justifying reasons for certain opinions to the public (in this case the public is the reader)

"Josh looked like the Korean genes had **skipped** him altogether." (Rowell, 2012, p. 117)

The metaphor used is personification metaphor, which referred to the sentence "*the Korean genes had skipped him altogether*". Personification is a conceptual metaphor in which a non-living thing is given the attributes of living thing. In the data, the non-living is the Korean genes and the given attribute is had skipped. This gives expression that Josh did not passed the Korean genes because it skipped him. This personification contains racial stereotypes because it creates certain physical standards to identify whether someone is from Korea or not.

Social Cognition Dimension

Socio-cognitive approach does not limit discourse analysis with the text structures only because the discourse structure embodied the meaning, opinion, and ideology of the text producer; how the text is produced. This dimension analyses mental awareness of the text producer and the hidden meaning of the text. The text producers are not considered as neutral individuals, but individuals who have various values, experiences, and ideological influences.

In this analysis, the researcher used three schemas to analyze the social cognition of Rainbow Rowell's *Eleanor and Park* novel, namely person scheme, role scheme, and event scheme.

Person Scheme

Person schema analyzes how a person perceives other people. In this case it means how Rowell viewed Park's mom. Rowell viewed Park's mother as a doll, exoticized Asians girls and exoticized Asian physical features. The researcher has elaborated that calling an Asian woman a doll is a racial stereotype and is a slur and harmful for Asian woman.

Role Scheme

Role scheme is about how one views the role and position of others in society. In this study, Rowell is the one who looks up while Park is the one whose role is looked at. After analyzing the semantic setting element, it was found that the internalized racism problem experienced by Park was not solved by Rainbow Rowell as the author. Rowell views Park's role as a character who comes from a minority group, merely an addition to the story although Park is the main character in *Eleanor and Park* novel.

Event Scheme

In event schema, Rowell was romanticizing the relationship between Korean women and American soldiers. It is proven in the data below.

“My dad. He served in Korea, they fell in love, and he brought her back.”

‘Wow, really?’

‘Yeah.’

‘That’s pretty romantic.’” (Rowell, 2012, p. 104)

Rainbow Rowell romanticize relationship between Korean women and American soldiers during war times, which is really dangerous to Asian community. United States

military used regulated prostitution services in South Korean military camp towns, and South Korean women were used as sexual services for the US military and a component of Korean-American relations (Lee, 2011, p. 35). Thus, Rowell's attitude of pairing Korean women (Park's mother) with American soldier (Park's father), then describing them as Paul Bunyan kissing a doll or Tom Selleck sneaking his China doll out of Korea, can be categorized as romanticizing the relationship between Korean women and American soldiers. On the previous analysis of detail aspect in microstructure, the researcher has pointed out Rowell used "China Doll" to describe Park's mom, which the terminology itself was brought by American Soldiers who were stationed in Asia.

Other than that, on her personal Goodreads account, Rowell addressed her statement that Park's parents' relationship was inspired by her dad and a Korean woman that met her dad when he served in Korea.

"My father served in Korea, in the Army..... He'd been in love with her..."
(Rowell, 2013)

SOCIAL CONTEXT DIMENSION

In analyzing texts, it is necessary to conduct intertextual analysis to examine how a discourse is produced and constructed in society. In short, in analysis the social context dimension, we have to find out how society views and construct a discourse that was discussed. There are two things important regarding society; power and access.

Power

White people are the majority in the United States, while Asian or Asian Americans are one of the minor communities. Since *Eleanor and Park* novel was written by white writers and published in a country where white people were the majority, the flaws in Park's character were not highlighted by most readers.

The other reason is Asian or Asian-Americans often referred as the "Model Minority", which is a stereotype developed in Western society that Asian or Asian-American are a better racial group than other minority groups. This stereotype creates an illusion that Asians do not suffer from racial inequality as if Asian community never faced racism. This leads Western society to forget what really happened to Asians community, also put them away from being treated better (Nguyen-Phuong-Mai, 2017, p. 5).

Access

Rainbow Rowell is a White author—one of the majority population in the US. The majority certainly have different access than the minority. Rainbow Rowell or the publisher of *Eleanor and Park* novel did not take any action although the readers have been calling her out for leaving Park's internalized racism just like that; it is not resolved in the story, only used as a spice for novels as if Park's issues are meaningless. This is because Rowell is part of the major community is USA and has privilege in the western media.

There were hardly any media that complained about the flaws in Park's character, except for blog posts written by several Asian readers, among which were "The Problem with Eleanor and Park" written by Chantal Cheung (2018) and "A Korean-American thoughts on E&P" written by Lynn Jung (2020). These blog posts received less attention from the public because the person who wrote it was Asian.

CONCLUSION

This research was a Critical Discourse Analysis study that aim to identify the racism in text structure, social cognition, and social context of the novel by using Van Dijk's Socio-cognitive approach. The findings expose the racism and racial stereotypes in Rainbow Rowell's *Eleanor and Park*.

In analysis of the text structure, the result showed that Eleanor, the female lead, Eleanor showed the characteristic of racism, whether it is through dialogue or monologue. She judged Park and Park's using racial stereotype of Asian. Park also had an inner conflict regarding his race, which is Korean-American.

In analysis of the social cognition, Rowell, the author of *Eleanor and Park*, exoticized Asians girls and exoticized Asian physical features. The presence of Park as the male lead with an Asian-American background was only considered as an addition to the story; Park's inner conflict (internalized racism) is never resolved the the story ended. Rowell also romanticized relationship between Korean women and American soldiers during war times, which is proven by her statement in her personal blogpost.

In analysis of social context, the result showed that in United States, white people are the majority and Asians or Asian-Americans are one of the minorities. Because *Eleanor and Park* novel was published in the place where White people are the majority,

the flaws in Park's character were merely discussed by most readers. "Model Minority" is also the problem why Park's weakness did not get enough attention. Rainbow Rowell, as the White author, has a privilege to access to western media. Her not solving Park's internalized racism is not a big problem in US. There were only a few readers that complain about Park, most of them are Asian and Asian-American and their complains did not get enough attention because they did not have access.

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