

## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

#### 1.1 Background of the Study

Racism can happen to anyone around the world regardless of gender, age, or social class. People from different races find it easy to get what is called oppression from the one who has power. People of different colors struggle for their justice to affirm that they are worthy of existing without fear when there are so many things that keep them oppressed. Racism is terrible simply because being different or not being White people means facing entrenched prejudice and discrimination. Racism impacts the everyday lives of African Americans in many aspects because most of them think that racism affects their ability to have equal opportunity and salary in the workplace, access to higher education and quality of public school, affordable housing and health care (Rankin 2017).

The issue of racism in America can be found for such a long time and has its own never-ending story. The eradication of racism is to fight for the African Americans' rights and many people regardless of their skin color. Many historical events show that America has two major trends: blatant racism and racially biased police brutality (Schwartz 2020, 280). According to Statista Research Department (2021), the number of fatal police shootings among African Americans was much higher than any other ethnicity, standing at 36 fatal shootings per million of the population as of June 2021. Several cases concerning racism and police brutality can be seen from the protests against police brutality following the killing of Eric

Garner in 2014 (Higgins and Schoen 2020). In 2020, George Floyd was the victim of police brutality, but Breonna Taylor and Rayshard Brooks were shot to death by police officers (O’Kruk 2020).

Moreover, prejudice and discrimination are important issues in discussing race and racism in a multicultural society. The practice of racial discrimination is not only happening to adults but also young African Americans. They can easily suffer from the practice of racial discrimination within the school environment. They are struggling to get rid of the racism practice and the stereotypes of White people against the African American community. According to Payne (1984, 128), racism had permeated the entire school system through instructional examples, textbooks, methodology, and teacher preparation. This racism practice is just one example of racial superiority, which leaves a devastating effect on African American generations of Americans.

Racism is an act of unequal power relations derived from the sociopolitical domination of a single race against another that results in systematically discriminatory practices (Tyson 2015, 360). The root of racism can be various. One of them is the social construction of race that explains the determination of race as a matter of physical features when people tend to see someone’s race through their difference in physical appearances such as light-colored skin or black-colored skin. People will get more than one source of oppression if their race intersects with class, political preference, personal experiences, sex, and sexual orientation, informing each person’s complex identity, such as black, gay, and unemployed (Tyson 2015, 376). In short, racism is treating one race who considers their race as superior and

others as inferior. People who consider themselves superior think that they have special rights among the inferior races.

Racial inequality that leads to the social hierarchy based on people from different races in the U.S. can be found in this contemporary society. In this case, African Americans are the community that is more likely to get racial disadvantages in the U.S. The black's oppression is considered to be commonplace for the majority of the people there (Feagin 2006, xiii). Although it is not only African American people who get such oppression, they become central to the racial reality of the colonials, which refers to the White-run colonies who mainly exploited African descent to be their primary source of labor in the 1700s (Feagin 2014, 14). According to Song (2004, 861), the African American community appears at the bottom of American racial hierarchy while White American is at the top. Looking at the racial hierarchy created by Whites, it tends to be favorable to them but detrimental to people of a different color. Nevertheless, it has occurred in some cases that African Americans are acceptable in White communities as long as they are wealthy.

People from different races are mostly proud of their identity and will be involved in the activity or supporting the community itself. Racism becomes a life experience of African Americans when Whites create frustration, anger, pain, et cetera. It also means that the Whites take control of themselves and their identity as the product of White-generated alienation (Feagin 2014, 24). People who start to lose their belief in their own identity will get confused about where they are

supposed to put themselves in which identity. With a feeling of comfort when joining a wrong identity, people will have difficulty adjusting later on.

In more specific cases of racism as a complex phenomenon that occurs among the society, conventions in U.S. society that put its strength against anti-black attitudes that arise even when the Whites do not discriminate against black people are the cause of institutionalized racism (Phillips 2011, 173). Although the near-slavery system had ended, African Americans still need to deal with institutionalized racism. Another explanation from Szulkowska (2017, 46) is that institutional racism is the expression of unfair treatment of non-White people in institutions such as government, schools, and even the media that become public consumption. Such mistreatment includes some people who control institutional power and use that power to oppress people of different races who should have equal opportunities.

Many literary works written by African American authors take racism as the central theme of its content. One of them is *The Black Kids* (2020), which is the coming-of-age debut novel by Reed that explores the issues of race, violence, and social class that already achieved a #1 New York Times bestseller and became a finalist for the William C. Morris Debut Award (“Simon and Schuster” n.d.; “Goodreads” n.d.). *The Black Kids* is a novel written as a narrative of the writer’s memory when she was eight years old. The novel takes place in Los Angeles and is written based on what the writer saw on the television when the 1992 Rodney King Riots happened. The novel shows the practice of racial discrimination that refers to racist policies and practices in institutions that occur in education and local

government or usually called institutionalized racism towards African Americans (Tyson 2015, 261).

The novel was set in 1992. *The Black Kids* told the story of Ashley Bennett, who gets caught in the 1992 Rodney King Riots. She is a senior year student who is also a wealthy African American teenager, living in a posh L.A. neighborhood with her parents. She also attends a private school and has lived a somewhat sheltered existence. Being the only Black girl in the middle of a White people's friendship, Ashley never felt odd when she was among them. Everything always happens that way, and even when her closest friends make racist comments towards her or her fellow African American, she takes that as a joke. It is just how it goes until that one time, the four White officers were acquitted after beating up Rodney King, who was an African American man that was later found not guilty of a crime that caused the worst riots in the U.S. since the 1960s (Matheson and Baade 2004, 2691). This riot makes Ashley realize that she is also one of the African American kids who will possibly get the oppression and discrimination from the Whites. Her troubled older sister, Jo, also involved in the riot, said she wants to fight for their rights as people of different colors. Jo believes that the riot is about a race riot and class, a rebellion of the poor and disenfranchised. The dark past of institutionalized racism in Ashley's journey is depicted from her grandmother's story, which leaves a big scar for her sons. Another character, Ashley's fellow Black friend, is LaShawn Johnson, accused of being a thief, looter, and thug because he can have fancy shoes while he is poor. The story is interesting to be analyzed because it depicts the African American's characters' in dealing and resisting with the past and racial

discrimination that they got from their surroundings. It depicts the struggle for justice of people from different colors through the eye of the African American teenage girl.

The main issue of the novel is racism that mainly occurs in various institutions. Thus, this study chooses institutionalized racism as the focus of this study. To examine the novel, the writer applies African American criticism, mainly focusing on four out of six key features of systemic racism proposed by Joe R. Feagin. Those key features include the White racial frame and racist ideology, alienated social relations, constant struggle and resistance, and related racial discrimination to reveal the practice of institutionalized racism in the novel. Therefore, this study elaborates on how African American characters experience institutionalized racism and how they resist institutionalized racism. Moreover, this literary text gives an insight into how African Americans depicts a long struggle to resist the continuous practice of institutionalized racism, although the era of slavery and colonialism ended a long time ago. Thus, it will make the readers more aware of the institutionalized racism that happens around them.

Furthermore, there are numerous studies on literature that have already examined oppression and discrimination happens in institutions. Yanti (2019); Khayaidee, Suranakkharin, and Chantharothai (2020); Indriani and Wahyuni (2021) study the practice of institutionalized racism found in a novel. Furthermore, they argue that racism practices happen in many forms in society, including internalized, intra-racial, and institutionalized racism in police institutions, employment places, and neighborhoods depicted in the novel. Yanti (2019) and

Indriani and Wahyuni (2021) discussed the same issues found in a young adult novel, while Khayaidee, Suranakkharin, and Chantharothai (2020) discussed the same issues, which is institutionalized racism but under the apartheid regime. On the other hand, this study focuses on African American characters who experience institutionalized racism and how they are fighting against it. This study argues that school, workplace, and police departments can be the places in which institutionalized racism can occur from generation to generation. It targets people of color from any background. Thus, it makes this study different from the studies mentioned above.

Eventually, the researcher is interested in analyzing institutionalized racism in Christina Hammonds Reed's *The Black Kids* due to the following reasons. First, the novel is written from the perspective of a wealthy African American girl, which is rarely found in literary works. Besides, some characters in the novel are analyzed to show that they are still questioning themselves about their identity, whether they really belong to the community or just do not care about it. This novel allows the reader to delve deeper into the thought of Ashley Bennett, who is the main character of the story and how she clearly described the prejudice, discrimination, and oppression towards her family and fellow African American friends.

Secondly, this is one of the contemporary novels released in the same year as the Black Lives Movement rose to protest racism after the killing of George Floyd in May 2020. This event can make people recall the history of the African American community's fight to get justice has been happening for such a long time. Therefore, the novel is proper to be analyzed since this is one of the good debut

novels by Christina Hammonds Reed that has the image of racism practiced toward the African American community in America.

### **1.2 Statement of the Problems**

After doing closed reading and find the topic of this study, there are two important questions arise which need to be analyzed further as follows:

1. How is institutionalized racism portrayed in Christina Hammonds Reed's novel *The Black Kids*?
2. How do the African American characters in the novel resist institutionalized racism?

### **1.3 Objective of the Study**

Based on the statement of the problems, the analysis of this study attempts:

1. To show the evidence of institutionalized racism portrayed in *The Black Kids*.
2. To examine how the African American characters' in the novel resist institutionalized racism.

### **1.4 Significance of the Study**

This This research is expected to provide the readers with an understanding of African American characters in the novel dealing with institutionalized racism that affected them throughout the story. Besides, this research is also expected to contribute to the English Language and Literature students at Universitas Airlangga, especially for the students who major in literature. This research will be helpful for those who apply African American criticism to analyze literary works



and inspire others to conduct a study on African American literature so that more people will gain knowledge of the history and the struggles of African Americans. By reading this study, the readers are expected to know how to apply African American criticism to reveal the practice of institutionalized racism depicted in the novel. Additionally, for common readers, the writer hopes that they will get some lessons about raising the awareness of racism practiced, especially institutionalized racism, toward the African American community in America since this kind of racism practice continues to happen in every part of the world.

### **1.5 Definition of Key Terms**

There are some important terms needed to be defined in this research. These are the definition of key terms:

Police brutality : The illegal and unwarranted or excessive use of force by U.S. police officers against civilians includes beatings, mistreatment, torture, even murder. Or in a broad definition, police brutality includes acts of intimidation, verbal abuse, and harassment (Moore 2020).

Black youth : Adolescents who experience interpersonal discrimination where they are at the stage of identity exploration that must deal with a complex history of socio-economic, cultural, and political marginalization as Black youth

- in America (Hope, Skoog, and Jagers 2015, 84).
- Inequality** : The disparities in wealth, power, property, and access to education and health care are dominated by powerful groups that affect the social life of societies (Rothman 2016)
- Oppression** : The unjust treatment or exercise of authority includes exploitative and other oppressive practices committed by Whites against African Americans socioeconomic resources and assets (Feagin 2006, 2).
- Black stereotypes** : A set of ideas or images by Whites addressed to Blacks as less controlled, more violent or more prone to crime than whites, gang members, athletes, and entertainers, but rarely as academics (Fries-Britt and Griffin 2007, 511; Higginbotham 2002, 147).