

RACIAL DISCRIMINATION AS THE REPRESENTATION OF AMERICAN SOCIAL LIFE IN 1970S IN MAYA ANGELOU'S SELECTED POEMS

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Abstract

Maya Angelou is an African-American writer who has successfully created autobiography novels, poems, song lyrics, and drama scripts. Most of her works tell about the experiences of African-American people being discriminated in America, especially her poems published in 1970s. This research chooses three of her 1970s poems as the objects of research to examine how racial discrimination in *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, *Alone*, and *Still I Rise* becomes the portrait of American social life in 1970s and how racial discrimination is described in those poems. This research uses qualitative research method. Facts and information related to racial discrimination in America in 1970s and the three poems are also gathered in order to support this research. The discussion starts from exposing the background condition of America in 1970s leading to the analysis of racial discrimination in Maya Angelou's selected poems which is focused on three core events; the white as the power controller, the weak black as the victim of racial discrimination, and the negotiation of freedom. The theory used at this point is Stephen Greenblatt's new historicism. Then, the discussion continues to analyze the intertextuality between American condition in 1970s and racial discrimination in the poems to determine the position of Maya Angelou's selected poems toward racial discrimination. As the result, this research finds out that from the range of racial discrimination discussion, Maya Angelou is in the position of exposing the mental experience of the black as the racism victim. This research also gain a conclusion that she describes the United States of America is in the middle of social anxiety in 1970s as the impact of the black and the white discomfort toward their position in society.

Keywords: *Racial Discrimination, American history, New Historicism*

Abstrak

Maya Angelou adalah seorang penulis Afrika-Amerika yang telah berhasil menciptakan novel autobiografi, puisi, lirik lagu dan skrip drama. Sebagian besar dari karya-karyanya menceritakan tentang pengalaman dari orang-orang Afrika-Amerika yang mengalami diskriminasi di Amerika, khususnya puisi-puisi yang ditulis pada tahun 1970-an. Penelitian ini memilih tiga puisi karya Maya Angelou yang ditulis pada tahun 1970-an sebagai obyek penelitian untuk mengetahui bagaimana *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, *Alone*, dan *Still I Rise* mendeskripsikan diskriminasi ras. Penelitian ini menggunakan metode penelitian kualitatif. Data yang dikumpulkan dalam penelitian adalah berupa fakta-fakta dan informasi yang berhubungan dengan diskriminasi ras di Amerika pada tahun 1970-an dan segala hal yang berhubungan dengan ketiga puisi Maya Angelou. Pembahasan dimulai dengan pemaparan kondisi Amerika pada tahun 1970-an lalu mengarah pada analisa diskriminasi ras di dalam tiga puisi karya Maya Angelou yang terangkum dalam tiga pokok kejadian; masyarakat kulit putih sebagai pengontrol kekuatan, masyarakat kulit hitam yang lemah sebagai korban dari diskriminasi ras, dan negosiasi kebebasan. Pada tahap ini, teori new historicism dari Stephen Greenblatt digunakan. Pembahasan dilanjutkan dengan menganalisa keterkaitan antara kondisi sosial Amerika pada tahun 1970-an dan diskriminasi ras di dalam tiga puisi tersebut untuk menentukan posisi dari puisi-puisi tersebut terhadap diskriminasi ras. Hasil dari penelitian ini menunjukkan bahwa dalam tataran pembahasan diskriminasi ras, Maya Angelou berada dalam posisi yang menunjukkan pengalaman mental dari masyarakat kulit hitam sebagai korban dari rasisme. Penelitian ini juga memperoleh kesimpulan bahwa Maya Angelou menggambarkan Amerika pada tahun 1970-an berada di tengah keresahan sosial akibat ketidaknyamanan orang kulit putih dan hitam terhadap posisi mereka di masyarakat.

Kata kunci: *Diskriminasi ras, Sejarah Amerika, New Historicism*

Introduction

The racial problem between the white and the black has begun since the slavery period. Emancipation Proclamation even fails to stop the clash of the two races.

Segregation for educational, medical, and institutional facilities give the blacks no chance for better livings after slavery. The white is still labeled as the smartest, the best, and the most diligent race among Americans while the black is also still haunted by the ugly, the wild, the

primitive and the unintelligent race. This condition puts the country in the great upheaval of civil right struggle in 1960s-1970s. However, the growth of literary arts which expressing the black's ideas and protest toward American unequal condition blooms in 1970s and it makes people call this period as the renaissance of African-American literature.

Ramey (2008:2) states that 1970s is the starting period when the researchers shows their excitements toward slave songs (poems and lyrics written by blacks) relating to the civil right issues and African-American's self-archiving. The black writers become more active in writing and publishing their works. One of the black writers is Maya Angelou. She has achieved some awards for her masterpieces such as Presidential Medal of Art (2010), Presidential Medal of Freedom for the Nation's Highest Civilian Honor (http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/wales). She was also appointed to recite her poem in Bill Clinton inauguration ceremony (Cox, 2006:92). Her ability to create the poems which move and touch people's feeling toward humanity brings this former African-American activist to be called as "Doctor Soul Maya Angelou".

Maya Angelou has a tendency to create her poems rhythmically. There is always the some stanzas with the same lines as the chorus of the poem. Some people name her poems as the lyric poetry since it has similar form with song lyric. Three of her poems are *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1970), *Alone* (1975), and *Still I Rise* (1978). Those are published at the same line period, 1970s, expressing the black perception about racial discrimination. Greenblatt states that human perception is important to help understanding the complex symbolic patterns of society in particular period because people tend to have shared assumptions about what happens in their society. Therefore this research use new historicism perspectives by Stephen Greenblatt to find out how racial discrimination in Maya Angelou's selected poems represent the portrait of social life in America in 1970s and how racial discrimination is specifically described in the poems.

Research Methodology

This research is sort of qualitative research since the analysis concerns on finding data primarily in the form of words instead of number. The primary data of this research are facts and information related to racial discrimination taken from the dictions of the selected poems of Maya Angelou while the secondary data are facts and information about racial discrimination in America in 1970s taken from African-American history books, the biography of the author, journals and articles.

This research tends to analyze racial discrimination as the representation of American social life in 1970s in Maya Angelou's selected poems. As stated by Gallagher and Greenblatt that literary criticism makes contact with

reality as touching one wire to another (2000:21). The analysis starts with a brief discussion about phenomena happen in America during 1970s and factors causing Maya Angelou to choose racial discrimination as the theme of her three poems. Then, the analysis continues with categorizing and deciphering dictions related to racial discrimination in the poem into three core events; the white as the power controller, the weak black as the victim of racial discrimination, and the negotiation of freedom. Stephen Greenblatt's new historicism leads the analysis to connect between racial discrimination in America in 1970s and racial discrimination discourse constructed by the poems. Moreover, the discussion goes to analyze in which position Maya Angelou's selected poems stand.

Result

Maya Angelou's selected poems; *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, *Alone*, and *Still I Rise* expose mental experiences of the black as they are the victim of racial discrimination discourses which circulate in society. From negotiation process depicted from the interaction between the white as the power controller and the black as the victim of racial discrimination, this research concludes that Maya Angelou tries to describe American society experience the social anxiety as the impact of people's discomfort toward their position.

Discussion

This research concerns on finding the social codes of racial discrimination in America in 1970s in three of Maya Angelou's selected poems without ignoring the writer's creativity to make such a great masterpieces. Therefore, the discussions are divided into three points:

1. American Social Life in 1970s

There are numerous great events happened in America in 1970s. The first is the desperation which still spreads over the black as the death of Martin Luther King Jr in the late 1960s. The blacks consider his death as the rejection of equality ideas and the failure of King's nonviolent movement. Many activists turns to be militant by excluding their white members and bringing weapon anywhere. The end of Great Migration in 1970 also takes a great role in the outburst of urban riots in 1970s. Coming to North America shows the blacks that they are disillusioned by their own expectations before leaving the south since their living condition in north is no better than their earlier condition; they live in ghettos which have bad air circulation and low quality water, the whites decide to leave the town and create luxurious suburbs, they have to pay higher for medical care, school, while work with lower salary than the whites. Moreover, Ricard Nixon's watergate scandal loses all American's faith toward presidency, especially the blacks.

Those incidents become inspirations for Maya Angelou to write the poems in that period. She is a former

activist who actively supports King's movement. Therefore, his assassination is a great loss for her and stimulates her to create more poems in 1970s. She notices that poems help the healing process for anyone, especially the blacks, who experience the loss, the despair and the hardship in their lives. Delgado and Stefancic consider this kind of poems as the cure for silencing (2001:43).

2. Racial Discrimination in Maya Angelou's Selected Poems

The analysis of Maya Angelou selected poems aims to obtain the thick description (Gallagher and Greenblatt, 2000:21). Thick description means the description is 'thick' enough explaining the poet's intention, and the complex life patterns which are recorded in the poems. Hence, there are three core events related to racial discrimination depicted in the poems:

1. The White as the Power Controller

I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings (1970), *Alone* (1975), and *Still I Rise* (1978) shows that the white is the agent of racism, the ideology that subdue and control their mind. This power shows them that the highest position offers them prosperities and authority to do anything they want. Therefore, the only thing that they have to do as the agent of racism is to keep the unequal position between the white and the black socially, historically, and institutionally. In the social life, the white decides to live separately with the blacks. Different living place also means different facilities as *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* shows that the white does not face problem to fulfill their needs while the black spends their time with tortures and dreaming to be free. The white also tries to keep the black to think that they are inferior by constructing racism discourse in American history. Greenblatt views that there is no history, it is only the representation history created by the white to reach their goals. However, the history told by the white has been considered as facts and ensured as the big stories of American history. By reading and believing the big stories, the black consciously or not also permits racial discrimination toward themselves. As the result, their position will never change.

2. The Weak Black as the Victim of racial Discrimination

Discourses telling about the sufferance of the blacks are usually called as 'minor discourse'. However, new historicist believes that they are also important to complete the representation of history. Hence, this research also exposes the depiction of the black as the victim of racial discrimination. The poems show that racial discrimination makes the black not confidence to face their future. There is no future for someone who lives inside the cage of segregation, limitation and stereotypes. The black's children grows help-hatred and excessive adoration toward the white. For the blacks who miraculously survive and gain better

fortune, they are busy paying expensive facilities and have no sympathy for other people. Maya Angelou describes these black people in her poem as "millionaires with money they can't use" or white-minded blacks. This condition implies the emergence of the clash within the black because of the continuation of racism discourse.

3. The Negotiation of Freedom

Negotiation intended in this research is the process of power shifting between the white and the black. Tyson states that new historicism ensures the fact that human always tries to escape from their position as victim (2006:285). This research captures the influence of Martin Luther King in Maya Angelou's selected poems. Dictions spread over the poems show that she still believes that non-violent movement is the best solution for racial problems in the country. In *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, she choose 'sings' as the black's reaction toward violence and restriction. Singing is one of African-American tradition as gospel is the first music they know since slavery period. Singing is also another kind of non-violent protest as King states that creative protest is better than physical violence. Christianity teaches its follower not to hurt people only for fulfilling someone's happiness. By singing, the blacks offer the white reconciliation as the solution of their conflicts. The blacks hope that songs and other creative protests recall the white humanity and remind them that every human is actually born as equal.

However, the white rejects the reconciliation since the black's condition get worse described in *Alone*. They even face another problem with the white-minded blacks. Maya Angelou warns the white to stop their racist actions because some blacks start to lose their patience and ready to 'blow the storm'. This condition shows that some blacks are pessimist toward non-violent movement. Nevertheless, Maya Angelou stress the statement 'nobody can make it out here alone' means the black or the white will never reach their goals if they do not help each other. At this point, she shows their position as the one who still supports non-violent movement. The last poem *Still I Rise* finally describes that the black begins to realize that they are actually not inferior. There are some fragments showing the black's confidence to face the racist white. The black is no longer worrying about the racial discrimination discourse circulates in society because they have succeeded to escape from racism ideology that put them as inferior. They no more consider themselves as the victim of racial discrimination since they mentally has achieved freedom and equality. These anti-racism ideology brings confidence and optimistic for the black to face their future.

3. The Position of Maya Angelou's Poems toward Racial Discrimination

Exposing the white as the race who deliberately tortures the black as the victim of racial discrimination implies the poet's intention to object the social construction.

Greenblatt even states that literary work is the product of the negation between the author and her society. American society has accustomed with the interpretation placed the white as the best race surrounded with good qualities while the black is bad without seeing another interpretation. Thus, Maya Angelou tries to destroy the old interpretation by offering the new interpretation based on the black's perception through her poems.

Maya Angelou realizes the function of literary work beside as a craft of creativity. There is the mode of existence, circulation, and negotiation functioning anti-racism discourse within American society in 1970s. She uses her works to show the unthought and unfelt story behind racial discrimination discourse in order to touch her readers feeling. Greenblatt states that sadness, happiness, disappointment, and anger are the element of life which are missed by scientific accounts (2000:30). People who experience discrimination in their lives have capability to understand the hidden message that lies behind the poems. In this case, the black who reads Angelou's poems comes to realize that they are not inferior and they are strong enough to resist racial prejudice, and segregation in American social life.

Conclusion

Racial discrimination in 1970s brings African-Americans to experience social anxiety. This phenomena happens because the white americans still believes they are born to be superior. This ideology pushes the white to keep maintaining racial discrimination discourses circulate socially, institutionally, and historically. The black unfortunately suffers from the white domination because racial discrimination leads to other racist practices such as segregation, stereotypes, and prejudices over their race which consider as 'minor'. At this stage, Maya Angelou uses her poems to attentively describe how the black mentally experience those situations.

Feeling discomfort over their position is not the only thing felt by the white but also the black. Therefore, there are negotiation process running in the selected poems of Maya Angelou as the black's efforts to escape from their victim position because racial discrimination is mean in posing them in the position where they do not have courage to think about their future, they live within an internal clash in their own community because some blacks turn to be careless of their own people, and they are not able to retire the stereotypes and prejudices because the white even depicts the black's inferiority in American history. Therefore, this research conclude that Maya Angelou perceives these events as the real factors why riots tremendously happen in America in 1970s.

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