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Racism in 20th-century American Novels

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بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

مَنْ عَمِلَ صَالِحًا مِّنْ ذَكَرٍ أَوْ أُنْثَىٰ وَهُوَ مُؤْمِنٌ فَلَنُحْيِيَنَّهٗ حَيَاةً طَيِّبَةً وَلَنَجْزِيَنَّهُمْ أَجْرَهُمْ
بِأَحْسَنِ مَا كَانُوا يَعْمَلُونَ

صدق الله العلي العظيم

[سوره النحل: 97].

In the name of Allah

**Whoever does righteousness, whether male or female, while he
is a believer - We will surely cause him to live a good life, and
We will surely give them their reward [in the Hereafter]
.according to the best of what they used to do**

[(Surah an-Nahl (97)]

Dedicated

To my fellow students

To my family

To my friends

And to everyone who helped me

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Abstract

Racism is the process by which systems and policies, actions and attitudes create inequitable opportunities and outcomes for people based on race. Racism is more than just prejudice in thought or action. It occurs when this prejudice – whether individual or institutional – is accompanied by the power to discriminate against, oppress or limit the rights of others. Racism has played a part in the social injustice that has been separating people for centuries, and the 20th century was a time when racist ideologies were at their peak. This study aims to examine the historical and literary context of racism and social justice in 20th-century America and how it is adapted in the novels *If Beale Street Could Talk* by James Baldwin and *If He Hollers Let Him Go* by Chester Himes.

This study is composed of five chapters, the first chapter is an introduction to the whole study, chapter two deals with the meaning of racism and characteristics of racism in 20th century. Chapter Three is methodology of the Study and chapter four is called data analysis in which two of American novels which are written in Twentieth Century that are tackled the theme of racism are :*If Beale Street Could Talk* by James Baldwin and *If He Hollers Let Him Go* by Chester Himes, these two novels will be analysis, and finally chapter five which is a conclusion of the study

Chapter One

Introduction

In the context of racism in the United States, racism against African Americans dates back to the colonial era, and it continues to be a persistent issue in American society in the 21st century. From the arrival of the first Africans in early colonial times until after the American Civil War, most African Americans were enslaved. Even free African Americans have faced restrictions on their political, social, and economic freedoms, being subjected to lynchings, segregation, Black Codes, Jim Crow laws, and other forms of discrimination, both before and after the Civil War. Thanks to the civil rights movement, formal racial discrimination was gradually outlawed by the federal government, and gradually came to be perceived as socially and morally unacceptable by large elements of American society. Despite this, racism against Black Americans remains widespread in the U.S., and it continues to be reflected in socioeconomic inequality. In recent years research has uncovered extensive evidence of racial discrimination in various sectors of modern U.S. society, including the criminal justice system, businesses, the economy, housing, health care, the media, and politics. In the view of the United Nations and the US Human Rights Network, "discrimination in the United States permeates all aspects of life and extends to all communities of color." (Henry, 2002:65)

1.1 Review of Related Literature

1. "Racism and Violence in Gar Anthony Haywood's P. I. Fiction " in this article the researcher "Nicole Décuré" tackles crime fiction, African American, racism, violence.

2. "Racism and Anti-Racism in Twentieth-Century European Educational Systems" in this study the writer "Laura CARTER" shows that "despite education systems in Europe and America now seeking to provide equal educational opportunities regardless of race, they are still battling structural inequalities that are the direct result of decades of accumulated racism and discrimination."

1.2 Statement of the Problem

Other researchers deal with another concept of racism but not in American novels and not in the twentieth century as in article 1 and 2, therefore racism in the twentieth century of American novels don't discuss by any researcher which is a gap to be considered.

1.3 Aim of the Study

This study aims to analyse the use of racism in Twentieth-Century American novels ,so that it hopes that this study can help readers to have a better understanding of the idea of racism and how it's reflected in Twentieth-Century American novels.

1.4 Research Questions

This study tries to answer the following questions:

1. What is the meaning of racism ?

2. What are the characteristics of racism in Twentieth-Century?

3.How did the writers of American novels in twentieth century reflected racism in their writing?

Chapter Two

Theoretical Background

2.1 Racism and its Characteristics in Twentieth Century

Racism is discrimination and prejudice against people based on their race or ethnicity. Racism can be present in social actions, practices, or political systems (e.g. apartheid) that support the expression of prejudice or aversion in discriminatory practices. The ideology underlying racist practices often assumes that humans can be subdivided into distinct groups that are different in their social behavior and innate capacities and that can be ranked as inferior or superior. Racist ideology can become manifest in many aspects of social life. Associated social actions may include nativism, xenophobia, otherness, segregation, hierarchical ranking, supremacism, and related social phenomena.(Dennis,2004:139)

It divides people into “us” and “them”, based on where we come from or the colour of our skin. And it happens when people feel that it’s okay to treat others badly as they go about their daily lives.Racism is never okay. But it still happens in America .Every day. Racism happens in lots of different ways. One hears it when people:

- make “jokes” or negative comments about a particular ethnic group
- call others racist names or verbally abuse them

- bully, hassle or intimidate others because of their race.

Not all racism is obvious. An employer might look through a list of job applicants and decide not to interview people with Arabic sounding surnames. Or a young guy from an African background might be followed around by security guards who assume he's going to steal something. These kinds of racism can be much harder to address, because they involve the prejudices that we often don't talk or think about. Racism is more than just words or actions. It also includes the invisible barriers, big and small, that can prevent people from doing as well in life as others simply because of their cultural background. (itstopswithme.humanrights.gov.au)

Racism, the belief that humans may be divided into separate and exclusive biological entities called "races"; that there is a causal link between inherited physical traits and traits of personality, intellect, morality, and other cultural and behavioral features; and that some races are innately superior to others. The term is also applied to political, economic, or legal institutions and systems that engage in or perpetuate discrimination on the basis of race or otherwise reinforce racial inequalities in wealth and income, education, health care, civil rights, and other areas. Such institutional, structural, or systemic racism became a particular focus of scholarly investigation in the 1980s with the emergence of critical race theory, an offshoot of the critical legal studies movement. Since the late 20th century the notion of biological race has

been recognized as a cultural invention, entirely without scientific basis.(Smedley,2024:3)

Following Germany's defeat in World War I, that country's deeply ingrained anti-Semitism was successfully exploited by the Nazi Party, which seized power in 1933 and implemented policies of systematic discrimination, persecution, and eventual mass murder of Jews in Germany and in the territories occupied by the country during World War II . In North America and apartheid-era South Africa, racism dictated that different races (chiefly blacks and whites) should be segregated from one another; that they should have their own distinct communities and develop their own institutions such as churches, schools, and hospitals; and that it was unnatural for members of different races to marry.(Smedley,2024:3)

Historically, those who openly professed or practiced racism held that members of low-status races should be limited to low-status jobs and that members of the dominant race should have exclusive access to political power, economic resources, high-status jobs, and unrestricted civil rights. The lived experience of racism for members of low-status races includes acts of physical violence, daily insults, and frequent acts and verbal expressions of contempt and disrespect, all of which have profound effects on self-esteem and social relationships.(Wellman,1993:56)

Racism was at the heart of North American slavery and the colonization and empire-building activities of western Europeans, especially in the 18th century. The idea of race was invented to magnify

the differences between people of European origin and those of African descent whose ancestors had been involuntarily enslaved and transported to the Americas. By characterizing Africans and their African American descendants as lesser human beings, the proponents of slavery attempted to justify and maintain the system of exploitation while portraying the United States as a bastion and champion of human freedom, with human rights, democratic institutions, unlimited opportunities, and equality. The contradiction between slavery and the ideology of human equality, accompanying a philosophy of human freedom and dignity, seemed to demand the dehumanization of those enslaved.(Wellman,1993:56)

By the 19th century, racism had matured and spread around the world. In many countries, leaders began to think of the ethnic components of their own societies, usually religious or language groups, in racial terms and to designate “higher” and “lower” races. Those seen as the low-status races, especially in colonized areas, were exploited for their labour, and discrimination against them became a common pattern in many areas of the world. The expressions and feelings of racial superiority that accompanied colonialism generated resentment and hostility from those who were colonized and exploited, feelings that continued even after independence.

Since the mid-20th century many conflicts around the world have been interpreted in racial terms even though their origins were in the ethnic hostilities that have long characterized many human societies (e.g., Arabs and Jews, English and Irish). Racism reflects an acceptance of the deepest forms and degrees of divisiveness and carries the implication that differences between groups are so great that they cannot be transcended.

Racism elicits hatred and distrust and precludes any attempt to understand its victims. For that reason, most human societies have concluded that racism is wrong, at least in principle, and social trends have moved away from racism. Many societies have begun to combat racism by raising awareness of racist beliefs and practices and by promoting human understanding in public policies, as does the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, set forth by the United Nations in 1948. (Gossett,1997:19)

In the United States, racism came under increasing attack during the civil rights movement of the 1950s and '60s, and laws and social policies that enforced racial segregation and permitted racial discrimination against African Americans were gradually eliminated. Laws aimed at limiting the voting power of racial minorities were invalidated by the Twenty-fourth Amendment (1964) to the U.S. Constitution, which prohibited poll taxes, and by the federal Voting Rights Act (1965), which required jurisdictions with a history of voter suppression to obtain federal approval (“preclearance”) of any proposed changes to their voting laws (the preclearance requirement was effectively removed by the U.S. Supreme Court in 2013). By 2020 nearly three-quarters of the states had adopted varying forms of voter ID law, by which would-be voters were required or requested to present certain forms of identification before casting a ballot. Critics of the laws, some of which were successfully challenged in the courts, contended that they effectively suppressed voting among African Americans and other demographic groups. Other measures that tended to limit voting by African Americans were unconstitutional racial gerrymanders, partisan gerrymanders aimed at limiting the number of Democratic representatives in state legislatures

and Congress, the closing of polling stations in African American or Democratic-leaning neighbourhoods, restrictions on the use of mail-in and absentee ballots, limits on early voting, and purges of voter rolls.(Gossett,1997:20)

Despite constitutional and legal measures aimed at protecting the rights of racial minorities in the United States, the private beliefs and practices of many Americans remained racist, and some group of assumed lower status was often made a scapegoat. That tendency has persisted well into the 21st century. Because, in the popular mind, “race” is linked to physical differences among peoples, and such features as dark skin colour have been seen as markers of low status, some experts believe that racism may be difficult to eradicate. Indeed, minds cannot be changed by laws, but beliefs about human differences can and do change, as do all cultural elements. (Gossett,1997:20)

Chapter Three

Methodology

This chapter presents the method that used in this study and the data collection and selection at the present study.

3.1 Methodology

Quantitative research is defined as the use of statistical procedures that are “based on numerical measurements of particular aspects of phenomena...and are easily replicable by other researchers” (King et al.,1994)

Qualitative research is a type of research that aims to gather and analyse non-numerical (descriptive) data in order to gain an understanding of individuals' social reality, including understanding their attitudes, beliefs, and motivation. (Creswell,2014)

Mixed methodology is when the researcher uses the mixed methodology to analyse some ideas insome selected data from the stylistic point of view. The mixed methodology is qualitative- quantitative methodology. In this study the qualitative method will be used to analyse the data of the Study.

3.2 Data Selection and Collection

Two of American novels which are written in Twentieth Century that are tackled the theme of racism are :If Beale Street Could Talk by James

Baldwin and If He Hollers Let Him Go by Chester Himes ,these two novels will be analysis.Basically, each novel represents how racism used and the researcher checks them very well before going deeply in analyzing the data. Every novel includes racism in some lines . They are native English novels

Chapter Four

Data Analysis

In this chapter two of American novels which are written in Twentieth Century that are tackled the theme of racism are :If Beale Street Could Talk by James Baldwin and If He Hollers Let Him Go by Chester Himes ,these two novels will be analysis.

Both these novels are written by African-American writers who deal with the topic of racism - racism is depicted in both of the mentioned novels, but each one deals with different problems. While Baldwin's novel deals with social injustice and police brutality, Chester Himes writes about racism in the workplace, difficulties in the employment of Black people, and how race influences the social class system in the United States. Despite the authors portraying a different aspect of discrimination, characters seem to feel the same way about living in America among the white majority. James Baldwin and Chester Himes expressed the issue of colourism differently. Baldwin only touched on the topic of colourism by suggesting that Mrs. Hunt, Fonny's mother, and her daughters disapprove of the colour of Tish's dark-skinned family. On the other hand, Chester Himes, as previously pointed out, talked about the advantages of being light-skinned. The character Alice is pictured as more privileged than Bob and other dark-skinned African-Americans in the novel. Alice belongs to the upper class of American society and is

respected among the Black community as well as having her status among the white people. She is wealthy and not bothered by the issues Bob and other Black people face – employment issues because of her skin colour. The author suggests that Alice does not understand Bob and tries to persuade him to return back to work where he feels mistreated and the following quote is a demonstration of Alice persuading Bob into staying in the company: (Hukelová,35)

'In the things you do and the decisions you make you just can't think of yourself alone. You have to consider our future ...' [...] 'If you don't go to that girl and apologize and try in every way you know to get reinstated - If you can't do that much, Bob, don't consider me as being with you any more ...'(Himes,143))

As the quote shows, Alice wants Bob to apologize to Madge, Bob's white co-worker, for storming out of the work after she was degrading him because, according to Alice, he should work so he could provide for their future despite the racist treatment. She believes in racial segregation in terms of economy (people of colour have trouble achieving financial success due to restrictions), education, and healthcare. However, according to Alice, black people are still able to control their family life which is how she justifies wanting Bob to keep working at the shipyard. Alice does not care that the company is mistreating Bob. She cares about her social status and marrying a wealthy man, and she threatens Bob with a breakup. On the other hand, Tish and Fonny, both dark-skinned African-Americans, feel the same about society and support each other, and they do not care about social status. (Hukelová,35)

Not only does Alice not understand the issues Bob and other African-Americans have to face, her white mother is also ignorant to racism. The following quote from the book shows how Alice's mother feels about racial issues:

'[...] White people are trying so hard to help us, we've got to earn our equality. We've got to show them that we're good enough, we've got to prove it to them. You know yourself, Bob, a lot of our people are just not worthy, they just don't deserve any more than they're getting. And they make it so hard for the rest of us. [...] Southern Negroes are coming in here and making it hard for us.' [...] 'We must pray and hope. We can't get everything we want overnight and we can't expect the white people to give us what we don't deserve. We must be patient, we must make progress.'(Himes,63)

Alice's mom claims that it is not a question of race and that white people are accepting of Black people, but Black people are ruining it for themselves by not trying hard enough to earn respect from white people. She also criticises the migration from the South by saying that migrants ruin it for other people. She discredits Black people's experiences and claims that they should work hard and wait for white people to acknowledge them over time. These beliefs seem to have an impact on Alice, who wants to pass as a white person so she can be treated better by society and the police, who treat white people better than African-Americans. (Hukelová,36)

The relation of colourism to the difference between social classes was often discussed in Himes's novel. The novel demonstrates the class difference between the upper and lower class and between white people and Black people. Bob belonged to the working class, and Alice and her parents, Mrs. Harrison and Dr. Harrison, belonged to the wealthy upper class. Upper class characters look down on the working class and underestimate their abilities. Mrs. Harrison has not only her opinions on racism but also on the lower class. She talks about how people at the shipyard do not have many opportunities to dress in a fancy manner because they spend their free time at bars and calls it a shame. Society treated Black people like outcasts – looked down on in institutions. For example, Bob is looked down on when he makes a reservation in a fancy restaurant for himself and Alice. Alice spends time with white people at fancy dinners and events, and it seems like she does not want to admit she is black in front of white people, so she is hesitant to go with Bob. Alice's fear of white people judging her for her skin colour and associating her with the lower class is demonstrated in the following quote from Himes's novel:

“She [Alice] said without thinking. 'But, Bob, with you everybody here knows just what we are.' [...] Finally I got it out: 'You mean when you go in with the white folks the people think you're white.'”(Himes,73)

The quote portrays how Alice tries to use her light skin to blend in with white people so she would not be mistreated for being an African-American and she could maintain her upper-class character. Alice

wants to pass as a white person not only to maintain her persona but so she can be treated better by society and the police, who treat white people better than African-Americans.(Hukelová,37)

On the other hand, the novel also suggests that just like people associated with the lower class are treated poorly at places where upper-class people gather, upper-class people, but also white people, can face similar prejudice. The following quote hints at this topic:

“That was a new club out on Central she'd [Alice] been trying to get me [Bob] to take her to ever since it opened; I suppose she figured that the people in her class didn't patronize such places and the only way she'd get there was for me to take her.”(Himes,55)

The quote suggests that it would be easier for Alice to blend with the community in the club if she were with Bob. This is because people would be more welcoming towards her since the people mistreated by the entitled upper-class society – Black people, people of colour, and working-class- and the white majority would not associate her with such groups. It displays the other side of the spectrum. (Hukelová,37)

Racism of American police officers against Black people is present in both *If He Hollers Let Him Go* and *If Beale Street Could Talk*., the police officers in both novels are guilty of discriminating against Black people. Officer Bell in Baldwin's novel associates Fonny with criminality on multiple occasions - during the already mentioned fight in a store and after the false accusations. During the confrontation in the store, Officer

Bell did not believe in Fonny's innocence and that he was standing up for his partner. Both Tish and Fonny were confronting Bell, and he did not believe the two African-American people and dismissed them with the following line: "We're going to take you down, boy," the cop said, "for assault and battery." (Baldwin, 101)

The Italian owner of the store defended the young couple which is when Bell had no choice but to leave Fonny alone. Despite Fonny only defending Tish from the man who assaulted her, Bell labelled Fonny as the aggressive one, which supports the theory that Black people are seen as violent by the police. (Hukelová, 38)

Officers in Himes's novel are no better than the police in Baldwin's novel. Bob often dreams about violence, and his dreams often include the police. When the two police officers stop light-skinned Alice and dark-skinned Bob, they treat Bob and Alice poorly because of their race, but after discovering Alice's social status and the influence of Alice's parents and their position in the community, they choose a slightly different approach to the situation. Compared to Baldwin's novel, where Fonny had no advantages in the community, Alice and Bob are released because of Alice's status. When it comes to similarities, the element that the two novels share is that both authors portray rape accusations. In Baldwin's novel, Fonny is accused of rape by a woman, Mrs. Rogers, who does not know Fonny personally. The following quote from Baldwin's novel discusses the accusation and the reason for blaming Fonny:

"Because Fonny was presented to her as the rapist and it was much easier to say yes than to try and relive the whole damn thing again. This

way, it's over, for her. Except for the trial. But, then, it's really over. For her." (Baldwin,87)

She is raped by an unknown man, and she picks Fonny as a suspect. Despite Tish's mother talking to the woman about the accusation, she does not want to deal with the situation anymore since it is traumatic for her. (Hukelová,39)

In Himes's novel the accusation is meant to cause harm to Bob and the following line is a demonstration of Madge's intentions: "I'm gonna get you lynched, you nigger bastard."(Himes,224)

Madge wants to harm Bob intentionally, and she tries to use her white privilege to achieve that. She wants to show Bob how much power she has over him by accusing him of rape and getting him lynched, and then later on dropping the charges. Both novels share certain similarities connected to rape accusations. Baldwin's character, Tish, and Himes's character, Alice, are hopeful that their partners will get justice and try to fight the allegations in a legal battle. On the other hand, Baldwin's character, Fonny, and Himes's character, Bob, do not trust the system. Bob tries to run away from California and start over in a different city to escape the punishment for false rape accusations which only causes him more problems. (Hukelová,39)

The main character in Himes's novel talks about how the justice system fails Black people in America, for example, the following quote:

But now I was scared in a different way. Not of the violence. Not of the mob. Not of physical hurt. But of America, of American justice. The jury and the judge. The people themselves. Of the inexorability of one conclusion - that I was guilty. In that one brief flash I could see myself trying to prove my innocence and nobody believing it. A white woman yelling, 'Rape,' and a Negro caught locked in the room.(Himes,231)

Bob know he does not stand a chance as a Black man accused of rape by a white woman in society of the 20th century and that the police are on her side despite the lack of evidence and the same goes for Fonny. Both Bob and Fonny got their lives ruined by getting falsely accused – Bob planned on marrying Alice and continuing his studies, and Fonny wanted to raise his baby with Tish. However, Bob ends up joining the army unwillingly, and Fonny remains imprisoned. Therefore, neither Bob nor Fonny gets justice.(Hukelová,39)

Chapter Five

Conclusion

Racism is discrimination and prejudice against people based on their race or ethnicity. Racism has played a part in the social injustice that has been separating people for centuries, and the 20th century was a time when racism is at its peak. Both novels are written by African-American writers who are experienced racism in their lives in the Twentieth century.

This study aimed to analyze the racism theme which is depicted in the novels by James Baldwin and Chester Himes . These novels show how race influences the social class system in the United States. Both novels share the notion that light-skinned African-Americans are regarded better than dark-skinned black people in the society of the 20th century, despite the varied approaches to colourism, people in America appreciate others according to the colour of the skin in work, in respect, and even in criminality according to their thinking, people with black colour isn't as good as people with white colour.

Despite the authors talking about a different aspect of discrimination, characters seem to feel the same way about living in America among the white majority, Baldwin touched on the topic of colourism by suggesting that Mrs. Hunt, Fonny's mother, and her daughters disapprove of the color of Tish's dark-skinned family. On the other hand, Chester Himes, as

previously pointed out, talked about the advantages of being light-skinned.

Black authors draw inspiration from their own experiences and discuss racism in order to spread awareness and advance Black people's equality. This study provided more details about the lives of James Baldwin and Chester Himes and indicated that Chester Himes reflected on some of his own experiences working at a shipyard in his novel.

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