

STRUCTURAL RACISM IN NOVEL ‘THE NICKEL BOYS’

BY COLSON WHITEHEAD (2019)

THESIS

*Submitted as Partial Fulfilment of the Requirement to Obtain Strata One (S1)
Degree in English Department*



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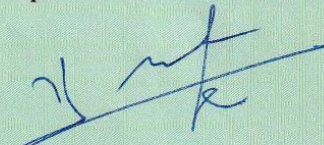
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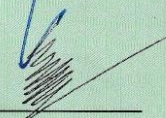
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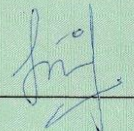
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ABSTRACT

Dzakhwan, Muhammad Abdurrosyid. 2025. **Structural Racism in Novel ‘*The Nickel Boys*’ (2019) By Colson Whitehead**. Thesis, English Language and Literature Department. Faculty of Language and Art. Universitas Negeri Padang.

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This research discusses the novel *The Nickel Boys* (2019) by Colson Whitehead. It explores the various forms, causes, and effects of structural racism experienced by African-American characters during the Jim Crow era. The Jim Crow era was a period in United States history, from the late 1800s to the 1960s, when laws and regulations in many Southern states enforced racial segregation and discrimination against black people. This research uses Critical Race Theory (CRT) by Delgado & Stefancic, especially structural racism, as a theoretical framework that refers to the concept of systemic racism by applying descriptive qualitative methods, with data taken from the interpretation of sentences or phrases and context to dissect the contents of the novel. The findings of the analysis indicate that structural racism can occur in various forms: disparities in education, economic and social class gaps and physical attacks. Some causes of structural racism also found such as: Historical experience, cultural stereotypes and social justice and law. Which resulted in several effects including: physical and mental impact, race discrimination, racial oppression in the Jim Crow era could occur due to social construction factors and with the intervention of institutions, governments and law enforcement officers that were not conducive to running properly which resulted in injustice to African-Americans.

Keywords: structural racism, African-American, discrimination, oppression

ABSTRAK

Dzakhwan, Muhammad Abdurrosyid. 2025. **Structural Racism in Novel ‘*The Nickel Boys*’ (2019) By Colson Whitehead**. Skripsi. Department Bahasa dan Sastra Inggris, Fakultas Bahasa dan Seni, Universitas Negeri Padang. Pembimbing: Dr. Muhd. Al-Hafizh, S.S. M.A

Penelitian ini membahas novel *The Nickel Boys* (2019) karya Colson Whitehead. Penelitian ini mengeksplorasi berbagai bentuk, penyebab, dan akibat rasisme struktural yang dialami oleh karakter Afrika-Amerika selama era Jim Crow. Era Jim Crow adalah periode dalam sejarah Amerika Serikat, dari akhir tahun 1800-an hingga tahun 1960-an, ketika hukum dan peraturan di banyak negara bagian Selatan memberlakukan segregasi dan diskriminasi rasial terhadap orang kulit hitam. Penelitian ini menggunakan Critical Race Theory (CRT) by Delgado & Stefancic, khususnya structural racism, sebagai kerangka teori yang merujuk pada konsep systemic racism dengan menerapkan metode kualitatif deskriptif, dengan data yang diambil dari interpretasi kalimat atau frasa serta konteks untuk membedah isi novel tersebut. Hasil temuan analisis menunjukkan bahwa rasisme terstruktur dapat terjadi dalam berbagai bentuk: kesenjangan pendidikan, kesenjangan ekonomi dan kelas sosial, serta serangan fisik. Beberapa penyebab dari rasisme terstruktur juga ditemukan seperti: pengalaman sejarah, stereotip budaya dan keadilan sosial serta hukum. Yang mengakibatkan beberapa efek diantaranya: dampak fisik dan mental, diskriminasi ras, penindasan rasial yang mana hal tersebut pada era Jim Crow dapat terjadi karena faktor konstruksi sosial yang kuat dan dengan adanya campur tangan institusi, pemerintahan serta aparat penegak hukum yang tidak kondusif berjalan dengan semestinya yang mengakibatkan ketidakadilan pada orang Afrika-Amerika.

Kata kunci: rasisme terstruktur, Afrika-Amerika, diskriminasi, penindasan

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TABLE OF CONTENT

ABSTRACT.....	i
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	iii
TABLE OF CONTENT.....	v
CHAPTER I INTRODUCTION.....	1
1.1 Background of the Study.....	1
1.2 Focus of the Research.....	10
1.3 Research Question.....	10
1.4 Purpose of the Research.....	10
CHAPTER II REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE.....	12
2.1 Review Related Studies.....	12
2.2 Previous Research.....	20
2.3 Conceptual Framework.....	23
CHAPTER III RESEARCH METHOD.....	25
3.1 Data and Source of Data.....	25
3.2 Technique of Data Collection.....	25
3.3 Technique of Data Analysis.....	26
CHAPTER IV DISCUSSION.....	28
4.1 Forms of Structural Racism.....	29
4.1.1 Disparities In Education.....	29
4.1.2 Economic and Social Class Gaps.....	32
4.1.3 Physical Attack.....	35
4.2 Causes of Structural Racism.....	38
4.2.1 Historical Experience.....	38
4.2.2 Cultural Stereotypes.....	41
4.2.3 Social Justice and Law.....	43
4.3 Effects of Structural Racism.....	46
4.3.1 Physical and Mental Impact.....	46
4.3.2 Race Discrimination.....	49
4.3.3 Racial Oppression.....	51
CHAPTER V CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTION.....	55
5.1 Conclusion.....	55
5.2 Suggestion.....	57
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	59

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background of the Study

For more than 200 years racism has been a serious social problem in the United States, both on an individual and universal scale. This act is based on a sense of superiority from certain groups or races that have a strong influence in controlling a certain group of people, which ultimately leads to racial discrimination. According to Delgado and Stefancic (2001) racism is part of the structure of the legal system that is rooted in the United States, which is being invigorated by the creativity, strength, intelligence, and humanity of voices speaking out about how to change that structure. It also can be reflected through the Jim Crow era, the era of the regime in America that lasted for almost 100 years where people with the white race strictly limited the civil rights of black people to obtain their basic rights as human beings. This act of discrimination or domination also unconsciously becomes a 'symbolic power' to state the 'normal' and 'abnormal' of certain groups, thus giving full privileges to the white race in all aspects including voting rights, access to education and employment (Desmond and Emirbayer 2009:345).

Reported by the public health post, data on April 2023 shows that as many as 37% of students in the US experienced bullying or cases of bullying experienced by black students, which exceeded the number of students from white. This data is involved in it without exception for students from colored

students, this has negative impacts both physically and mentally. This is very dangerous because the long-term impact is very negative, it can spread to achievement, unemployment and other risks, even the worst is self-harm. Supported by data from the Civil Rights Data Collection 'CRDC', this racially-based student bullying has actually occurred in recent times in public schools between 2017-2018.

Cases uncovered by the ACLU in 2023 also highlighted racial inequities in the U.S. school disciplinary system. The report found that black children are more likely to receive sanctions or punishments such as suspension or expulsion from school, even though they often commit the same or less serious offenses than white students. One example is found in the Chicago school district, where the rate of black students expelled from school is much higher than that of white students, even though both groups commit similar offenses. Over the past decade, the disparity between the number of black and white juveniles incarcerated has remained high. This was evident in 2021 when black juveniles were 4.7 times more likely to be placed in juvenile detention facilities than white juveniles, the data was collected in October 2021 and has just been released. This disparity has barely changed over the past decade as stated by Joshua Rovner 2023. It is this unfair treatment that triggers assumptions about structural racism.

With the concept of superiority by the white race that has been going on from time to time and giving rise to acts of racial discrimination, another concept was born that is still rational from acts of racism or "racialized rules" namely 'structural racism'. The concept of structural racism is related to 'institutional

racism', but 'structural racism' and 'institutional racism' are two different concepts. Structural racism does not only operate within the scope of the individual but also extends beyond the individual level, this also emphasizes that structural racism is not only limited to or solely about institutions that act separately but rather to acts of racism that are carried out intentionally on the basis of a 'sense of superiority' such as establishing policies that are based on restricting access to certain races (Wien, Miller and Kramer 2023:5).

Structural racism often becomes a social discussion that is inseparable from the influence of certain groups or classes who try to dominate their role in the social sphere but in a negative way, in other words creating a role of racial inequality that is formed in a 'systematic' and 'systemic' way. Structural racism can occur in various ways, although over time it has been a resistance in protest against this behavior. In this matter, cases of structural racism can be rooted in colonialism, slavery, discrimination in systemic forms, and the existence of class differences based on racial reasons. Bailey (2021:1) stated that structural racism is also called the invisible evil, because it is pervasive, and at its worst it can affect multiple systems and sectors, and it can also create a blind perspective towards white supremacy.

Structural racism is a systemic problem that is difficult to overcome because it involves many sectors such as policy changes, social structures, and people's thinking patterns. Referring to this structural racial phenomenon, the United States can be rooted in a long history of the problem, where racial practices have been formed and maintained through certain policies, social norms,

and institutions that systematically benefit one racial group (in this case the white race) and they oppress other racial groups (black people) or African-american. According to a survey by the Pew Research Center in June 2024, there was a drastic increase of three-quarters of black people who reported that they experienced discrimination either routinely or occasionally (62%). This could be due to several factors based on economics or education, but it is possible that black people with college education also experience discrimination, even not much different from high school graduates or lower, between (77%-70%).

In relation to the topic of 'Structural Racism', Colson Whitehead's novel *'The Nickel Boys'* is chosen for analysis. Published in 2019, the novel is a depiction of the author's tendency to write in the genre of historical fiction and contemporary literature. The author is famous for his writings that tend towards historical fiction, contemporary literature. He was born in New York, USA on November 6, 1969. He earned a bachelor's degree in literature while studying at Harvard University in 1991. Because of his expertise as a writer and journalist who raises historical issues wrapped in fictional elements, his work becomes a relevant reflection that is a picture of real life that still occurs.

Colson Whitehead is known well as a writer who has won many awards, after graduating from Harvard University, he started working at the Village Voice, where he worked to write reviews of television, books, and music. He has received many achievements and awards when he pursued his career as a writer. The most memorable is his award as the first writer to win the Pulitzer Prize for consecutive books: the historical novels *'The Underground Railroad'* (2016) and

'The Nickel Boys' (2019). For the extraordinary achievements he got for his efforts, this is not far from his background when he was in college and joined the Dark Room Collective (a group of writers from local black youth), and befriended classmate Kevin Young, who is known as a poet and director of the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture.

Colson Whitehead has often raised stories with African-American characters that he wrote in several of his novels such as *'The Intuitionist'* (1999) which is thick with racial, social and gender issues, most of his works are also inspired by Toni Morrison. Then the tragic story of a black detective named John Henry which he raised in his novel entitled *'John Henry Days'* (2001). Until at its peak he raised the issue of slavery which he wrote in the novel *'The Underground Railroad'* which won the Booker award. Because he was an American, he saw his environment as a reflection that he criticized using his literary works. His strong will was based on his perspective which saw past events as lessons to make society aware through the literary works he wrote, the existence of slavery in the past, racism, social issues that attracted his attention to want to write and raise sensitive issues that could be repeated and even happen until now.

Colson Whitehead's novel *'The Nickel Boys'* (2019) offers a story that highlights the setting in a contemporary environment and its exploration of class, racism, systemic violence, and social issues. Structural racism or better known as the concept of systemic racism is very prominent in this novel, this is different from some of the novels above because the impact is universal in the sense that it is not only felt by an individual but its scope is widespread even after the era

ended 'Jim Crows' which was raised as the setting of the novel, still left deep wounds on the characters involved in it. The resistance that is attempted to be expressed as a voice in demanding justice is also presented in this novel, it does not only highlight oppression but there is resistance that is attempted even though in the end the highest power still has full authority over social control over the issues raised.

The story focuses on the friendship of two teenagers named Elwood Curtis and Turner. Elwood Curtis is a hopeful and intelligent teenager who holds fast to Martin Luther King Jr.'s principles of a just and equal life and a non-violent struggle. Elwood has an idealistic and optimistic attitude, unlike Elwood who holds fast to idealistic principles, Turner is a boy who is skeptical of the idea of goodness and justice. It is possible that because he came from a tough background, he is a much more cynical and apathetic character.

The narrative of the novel '*The Nickel Boys*' initially focuses on the story of Elwood Curtis who was raised by his grandmother in Tallahassee, Florida, set in 1960. Elwood, with his strong exploration spirit, one day gets caught up in an incident involving him in a car theft case that forces him to enter and be thrown into 'Nickel Academy'. This school was founded to meet the expectations of reform standards for troubled boys. This is where the meeting between the two friends was established, Turner who had been there first met Elwood and taught him what things and what he had to do at Nickel Academy. In fact, the reform school failed to implement the ideals they brought, the staff there who were

mostly white also vented their anger and tortured the students there, especially black students.

Elwood and Turner, despite their opposing outlooks on life, still try to survive in this brutal academy environment. The idealistic and intelligent Elwood still tries to maintain his belief that one day he will get out of there and live a better life, while Turner with his skeptical attitude brings a more realistic impression and believes that the hopes that Elwood dreams of will be in vain.

This is seen when they try to fight and find a way out, they are trapped in a system that is very oppressive to them, not only the two of them 'Desmond and Jaimie', who are Elwood's best friends who try to rebel against the system. The four of them have a '*fantasy*' to poison the staff there because they hate them, but it's just a fantasy. But not with Jaimie who did it for real, with horse poison, he tried to poison the staff there named Earl, Spencer's righthand man, a Nickel Academy supervisor who cruelly tortured Elwood while he was held in solitary confinement and did not hesitate to kill students who did not obey him. Earl was successfully poisoned, but the systemic violence that Nickel Academy showed did not end there, Maynard Spencer looked for a replacement who was certainly more vicious and cruel than Earl, Hennepin. In the end the cruelty continued and brought Elwood's experience to a more miserable end.

The Novel '*The Nickel Boys*' offers a unique perspective on racism apart from other literary works with the same approach. For Example literary works such as '*Beloved*' (1987), '*To Kill a Mockingbird*' (1960), '*The Hate U Give*' (2017) mostly focus on raising racial issues that only focus on the main character.

In contrast, *The Nickel Boys* novel is different from the previously mentioned novels by revealing the problem of hidden violence that is rarely revealed in society with problems that are closely related to social justice that are faced by several characters and it's based on real history. Basically the focus of the issue of racism here does not only affect individuals, but also spreads to the social construction that is clearly depicted in this novel, based on the life journey of the characters when they faced directly with the reality of society in that era where the highest power was indeed held by the white race.

The conflict that arises in a very intimate way and psychological pressure clearly depicts the experience of living in a highly structured system and questions the capacity of each individual to survive in the face of such great injustice. Thus, this novel not only tells the story of a teenager's resistance to the cruelty of oppression, but also about how the system damages and changes individuals deeply in its climax, thus firmly offering a more complex reflection on history and social inequality. Therefore, this is the right subject of study for researchers to analyze the structural racial theme in this literary work.

Previous research that discusses this topic has been the subject of research. One of them is "*Structural Racism in Angie Thomas's Novel The Hate U Give (2017) by Ananda*". She finds out that the structural racism in the novel '*Hate u Give*' which is symbolized as a voice to fight against the injustice that black people experience. She emphasized that there are two things that build structural racism in African-American society in the novel which makes it difficult for them to get their basic rights as human beings, such as jobs, decent wages, and framing

that makes them isolated because their lives are considered dirty and unworthy, namely media and society.

Based on the research, the researcher sees a tendency to not only analyze the causes of structural racism, forms of structural racism but also elaborate on the effects of structural racism in '*The Nickel Boys*' (2019) by Colson Whitehead. In addition, this novel is mostly analyzed through psychoanalytic approach, sociological approach of literature, and form of racism theory. Thus, in this study, the researcher took steps to analyze structural racism in this novel by applying Critical Race Theory and approach with structural racism concept using 'Systemic Racism Theory' by Feagin.

In the book *Critical Race Theory: An Introduction* by Delgado and Stefancic (2001) it is explained that this theory does not only focus on acts of racism or oppression carried out by the white race against certain skin races such as African-Americans but also questions the extent of the role of institutions, law and culture in controlling and shaping negative perspectives of society towards groups other than whites who control the major role in social structures especially in the United States. By raising the history behind the Jim Crow era, the novel '*The Nickel Boys*' is one of the many literary works that are suitable to be used to analyze the practice of racism with the theory of Critical Race Theory, of course not only focusing on individual but also social space.

1.2 Focus of the Research

In this study, the researcher focuses on the causes that contribute to structural racism, forms of structural racism, and what impacts structural racism is found in Colson Whitehead's novel *The Nickel Boys* (2019). The focus of this research problem aims to examine the structural racism experienced by the characters, particularly focusing on the existence of structural racism shown in this novel.

1.3 Research Question

Structural racism is an important issue to be analyzed in '*The Nickel Boys*' (2019). Therefore, there are three research questions to determine the issue of structural racism, which as follows:

1. What are the forms of Structural Racism in *The Nickel Boys* (2019) by Colson Whitehead?
2. What are the causes of Structural Racism in *The Nickel Boys* (2019) by Colson Whitehead?
3. What are the effects of Structural Racism in *The Nickel Boys* (2019) by Colson Whitehead?

1.4 Purpose of the Research

According to the formulation of the research problem above, the aim of this research is :

1. To find out the forms of Structural Racism in *The Nickel Boys* (2019) by Colson Whitehead

2. To find the causes of Structural Racism in *The Nickel Boys* (2019) by Colson Whitehead
3. To find out the effects of Structural Racism in *The Nickel Boys* (2019) by Colson Whitehead

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTION

5.1 Conclusion

In the novel '*The Nickel Boys*' by Colson Whitehead (2019) the researcher through the discussion revealed that structural racism does not only occur on a small scale or individual, but can occur on a large scale involving large institutions such as government, politics, police, education and even supported by historical factors. This is very contradictory, because these institutions should take a role in protecting and mediating between racial differences, but in this novel, these institutions actually create the structural racism that occurs systematically in American society at that time. This novel will focus on structural racism that is not only experienced by the main character Elwood Curtis but also experienced and even impacted several other characters.

The Nickel Boys novel manifests the forms of structural racism in various forms, analysis through disparities in education, economic and social class gaps and physical attacks through the perspective of structural racism reveals that racist actions in that era were formed and strongly supported by the role of social construction. Disparities in education experienced by Elwood when he found inequality in school facilities and his low position at Nickel Academy because of his race provide a strong portrait of the differences in rights between black and white people in the scope of education. Poverty and limited rights reflected by the

Elwood families and Jack Turner's background also illustrate the existence of economic and social class gaps based on race triggered by restrictions on their rights and positions in society. And the physical attacks received by Elwood when he was at Nickel Academy clearly illustrate how racism is formed in a structured manner and involves large institutions to help preserve the existence of racist actions that are developing in society.

Causes of structural racism are clearly portrayed in this novel in various causes, Historical experience, cultural stereotypes and social justice and law revealed in several characters. The emphasis of racism in the Jim Crow era which clearly underlies the Historical experience by Elwood who has no hope after Elwood's grandmother Harriet explains the cruelty and difficulty of the black race to escape from the grip of Jim Crow. As well as the low views received by Elwood and Turner when they were at Nickel Academy who were not recognized because of their race on the basis of cultural stereotypes and the police treatment of Elwood who forced him a suspect for criminal because of his race clearly illustrates the concept of structural racism which was exist due to the role of large institutions and even the role of history, making it very difficult for black people to voice their rights in that era.

In this novel, the effects caused by structural racism occur in several effects such as physical and mental impact, race discrimination, and race oppression which are long-term and even leave a mark on the black race at that time. The physical attacks and mental impact experienced by Elwood are clearly visible when he faces discrimination at Academy Nickel, *Brown v. Board of*

Education which occurs due to racial discrimination is also evidence in this novel that structural racism occurs because of social construction that supports it and the race oppression experienced by Elwood's friend 'Griff' when forced to lose in a boxing match is also evidence that the impact is becoming a serious threat to the black race.

In conclusion, the researcher realizes that America has had many problems since long ago, regarding the problem of racism or racial discrimination based on history such as slavery and which is highlighted in the novel 'The Nickel Boys', the Jim Crow era. This is not only detrimental to black people or negroes but also to all people who are not white such as coloured people. This is certainly very detrimental because racism based on American history such as the Jim Crow era discriminates against anyone, be it women or men, children or adults and because of this, their opportunities to voice their rights are limited and their space for movement in society becomes increasingly narrow, forcing them to live under pressure and low social class. Like the dynamics depicted through the characters of Elwood and Jack Turner who try to fight the injustice of systemic racism at Nickel Academy, so that in the end it was revealed when the Jim Crow era ended and it took decades to resolve it.

5.2 Suggestion

Through this research entitled 'Structural Racism In Novel *'The Nickel Boys'* By Colson Whitehead (2019), The researcher hopes that in the future, the next researcher's attention to the topic of racism or discrimination through this

novel will be elaborated. If future researchers choose to analyze 'The Nickel Boys' using the same theoretical framework, they can expand this research by not only revealing the characters in more detail but also the conflicts and settings in each event to obtain a more comprehensive interpretive analysis or using other theory besides Critical Race Theory. Furthermore, the very new research conducted on the novel 'The Nickel Boys' is expected to truly provide a better picture and inspiration that opens the readers' horizons to be more concerned about the phenomenon of racism that is slowly happening not only openly but can also be through social media and occurs at any time and is not bound by time so that it can increase understanding and awareness of various racial problems or discrimination that can endanger society.

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