

REJECTIVE BEHAVIOUR TOWARDS THE AFRICAN-AMERICAN CHARACTERS OF MATT RUFF'S *LOVECRAFT COUNTRY* NOVEL

Alya Rozzan, Singgih Daru Kuncara, Chris Asanti

English Department, Faculty of Cultural Studies

Mulawarman University

Email: alya.rozzan@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

The study aims to identify the types of rejective behaviours portrayed in Matt Ruff's *Lovecraft Country* novel and to discuss the portrayal of African-American characters' responses to rejective behaviours. This research is a descriptive research that uses a mimetic approach and multicultural criticism to conduct the investigation. The data source of the study is Matt Ruff's *Lovecraft Country* novel. The data are acquired from the narration and dialogues related to the mistreatments toward the African-American characters and their responses that are suitable to the criteria of Allport's theory of rejective behaviours and Mellor's responses to racism theory. The results show that verbal rejection (antilocution), discrimination, and physical attack are all portrayed in this novel albeit with different frequencies for each African-American character. It is also discovered that the characters have depicted defensive response, controlled response, and confrontational response in dealing with rejective behaviours.

Keywords: Race, Discrimination, Racism, Rejective Behaviours, Responses to Racism

ABSTRAK

Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengidentifikasi tipe-tipe rejective behaviours yang digambarkan dalam novel Lovecraft Country Matt Ruff dan mendiskusikan penggambaran respons karakter ras Afrika-Amerika terhadap rejective behaviours. Penelitian ini adalah penelitian deskriptif yang menggunakan pendekatan mimetik dan kritik multikultural dalam melakukan pengkajian. Sumber data dari kajian ini adalah novel Matt Ruff yang berjudul Lovecraft Country. Data diperoleh dari narasi dan dialog terkait perlakuan tidak adil terhadap karakter-karakter Afrika-Amerika beserta respons mereka yang sesuai dengan kriteria dari teori rejective behaviours Allport dan teori respons terhadap rasisme Mellor. Hasil dari kajian menemukan bahwa verbal rejection (antilocution), discrimination, dan physical attack digambarkan semua di novel ini meskipun dengan jumlah kejadian yang berbeda untuk setiap karakter ras Afrika-Amerika. Telah ditemukan juga bahwa karakter-karakter tersebut menggambarkan defensive response, controlled response, dan confrontational response dalam menghadapi rejective behaviours.

Kata kunci: *Ras, Diskriminasi, Rasisme, Rejective Behaviours, Respons terhadap Rasisme*

A. INTRODUCTION

Racial prejudice and discrimination are long-standing issues in the society, especially in the United States. Recent surveys indicate sixty-four percent of people claimed racial discrimination remains a grave concern in American society and politics. Roughly half of African-Americans said they have experienced frequent cases of unfair treatment and harassment based on their race (Arengé). For instance, school segregation has continued to escalate over the last few years. Studies shown that American schools are more segregated now than they have ever been in more than four decades (Orfield 3). Even as our society has grown more diverse, the number of schools where less than one percent of students are white has increased to nearly 7,000 schools in 2011, from 2,762 in the year 1988 (Hannah-Jones). Moreover, police brutality toward blacks appears to be on the rise as well. According to the recent statistics, African-Americans are almost three times more likely to be shot and killed by the police than Caucasians. It was reported that one in every sixty-five deaths of a black man in America is caused by police's brutality and approximately twenty-five percent of those who were killed were unarmed (Swaine, Laughland, Lartey, and McCarthy).

There are many more case of racial prejudice and discrimination reported despite African-Americans' long struggle for equal rights and numerous civil rights movements to end these issues. There are still many people who treat black people unfairly due to their race. While mistreatments based on race is often seen in reality, it can also be found in literary works that reflect the social phenomenon of racial bigotry. Through this study, the researcher aims to identify the rejective behaviours and analyze the portrayal of African-American characters' responses to those behaviours in Matt Ruff's *Lovecraft Country* novel. It is hoped that the study can provide more information to the readers about racial prejudice and discrimination, rejective behaviours, victim's responses to racism, and can give ideas for the future researcher in conducting a similar research related to racial issues.

B. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Based on the background and the research questions mentioned above, the theories used in this study include: rejective behaviours, responses to racism, and characterization.

1. Rejective Behaviours

If someone expresses their negative prejudice toward a person or a group, then this action can be regarded as rejection or rejective behaviour. It is an act that a person carried out to show their prejudiced belief (Allport 15). Accordingly, there are three types of rejective behaviours including verbal rejection (antilocution), discrimination, and physical attack.

a. Verbal Rejection (Antilocution)

Verbal expressions of rejection are considered the most common rejection. These expressions of animosity can range from mild to severe. Jokes and derision are deemed as the mild ones. Behind jokes that seem harmless lies hostility that insult the racial minorities, which also served as proof of the groups' inferiority. The severe verbal expression of rejection is name-calling. Deep and long-standing hostility is deemed as the general cause of name-calling (Allport 50). It can be racial slurs or any derogatory terms such as "nigger" for African-Americans, "gypsy" for Romani people, "zipperheads" for Asians, etc.

b. Discrimination

Discrimination can be defined as the act of denying equal treatment of individuals or groups of people (Allport 51). Individuals do not have the rights to receive the same opportunities to employment, housing, and education based on the racial or ethnic group they belong to. They may not be allowed to live in the same neighbourhood as whites. Finding a job may also be difficult for some people from minority groups. There is also a high chance that facilities in public schools where most blacks or minority groups attend are severely lacking as opposed to schools which whites attend.

c. Physical Attack

The most severe type of rejective behaviour is physical attack. It is considered as such because of how malicious and violent this behaviour is. Physical attack may involve attacking someone because of their racial or ethnic group (Allport 57-58).

2. Responses to Racism

Following Allport's theory regarding rejective behaviours, it can be argued that the experience of such treatment may cause the victim to react in particular ways during their interaction with the superior groups. David Mellor has established three types of responses that individuals use in dealing with racism (69), or in Allport's term, rejective behaviours:

a. Defensive Response

A response can be classified as defensive when the victim reacts in ways that may protect themselves. The victim may "put up with" the occurrence of rejective behaviours—that is, they let the perpetrator treat them however they want without any protest. Furthermore, the victims may also actively defend themselves from such behaviours by avoiding the potential perpetrator or situation. In addition, seeking social support can also be categorized as a defensive response since it allows individuals to "share the experiences they have encountered and to affirm the racist nature of them," (Mellor 67).

b. Controlled Response

Controlled response involves individuals to maintain their self-control in dealing with rejective behaviours. One way to do so is by taking a conscious

situational decision to ignore the incident and hold back their feelings, which implies that there is tension between the inclination to respond and the decision not to. While similar to the previous passive defensive response, this one takes immense self-control to not react, unlike the former which comes naturally because it is essentially a subconscious resignation to fate (Mellor 68).

c. Confrontational Response

Confrontational response entails the action of fighting back against the perpetrator of rejective behaviours. The perpetrator will be confronted by the victims who reprimand the former, telling the perpetrator that they have the rights to be respected and do not deserve to be mistreated. A higher degree of this response is to exact revenge against someone who has treated them badly. The victims retaliate by inflicting the same or perhaps a more severe physical and/or verbal attacks (Mellor 68).

3. Characterization

A character is one of the most important parts of a story. It can be described by using character-traits. As one might expect, character traits are not so easy to spot. This is because they may not be told directly in the text. They are constructed by gathering several character-indicators scattered across the text and sometimes inferring the traits from these indicators when needed. These character-indicators are what can be referred to as characterization. Textual indicators of character are classified into two basic types. They are direct definition and indirect presentation (Rimmon-Kenan 61).

a. Direct Definition

In direct definition, character trait could be quite straightforward. It is identified by an adjective (e.g. 'she was brave'), an abstract noun ('Ben was honest to a fault'), it could also be some other kind of noun ('he was such a douche') or part of speech ('she was insecure about herself'). However, it could only be classified as direct characterization if the one who identifies the character's features has "the most authoritative voice" in the text (Rimmon-Kenan 62). They are the narrator or the main character, or any other characters who may influence how the story progresses.

b. Indirect Presentation

In indirect presentation, a trait is not mentioned explicitly. Instead, it shows and illustrates it in various ways so that the reader could deduce what traits do they imply (Rimmon-Kenan 63). There are four ways in which the trait can be presented indirectly: action, speech, external appearance, and environment.

(1) Action

Actions can imply a trait of a character. It may be implied by one-time (or non-routine) actions and by habitual actions. On the other hand, one-time

actions are prone to express the character's dynamic aspect. Habitual actions, on the other hand, are prone to show the static aspect of the character. There are categories in which one-time and habitual actions can be classified. Those categories are: act of commission, act of omission, and contemplated act. An action can be classified as an act of commission if it is carried out by the character intentionally. If the action is not carried out by the character even though they should, then it can be categorized as an act of omission. A contemplated act is if a character does something without realizing or intending it (Rimmon-Kenan 63-64).

(2) Speech

Speech can imply a trait or traits of a character both from its content and through its form (Rimmon-Kenan 65). For the content, what a character said about another may reveal their own character trait. If the trait is deduced through the form then how the characters spoke may indicate their traits. In other words, the language or the manner of speech may suggest the character's background, origin, or social class (Rimmon-Kenan 66). This method of characterization is commonly used in stories where the characters' manner of speech is distinguished from the narrator's.

(3) External Appearance

Traits can also be found through the character's external appearance. However, it does not include any physical appearance of the character since it is not something that a character can decide. The external appearance that is meant here is one that the character can choose, like clothes and hair-style (Rimmon-Kenan 67).

(4) Environment

Environment can serve a role in representing the character's trait. The environment may be a character's physical surrounding and his human environment. The physical surrounding can be the house and town he lived in, while the human environment is the people around him, like his friends and family (Rimmon-Kenan 68).

C. RESEARCH METHOD

This research is a descriptive research as Nassaji stated that descriptive research is concerned with describing a phenomenon and the characteristic of it (129). It is suitable for the aforementioned theory because racial prejudice and discrimination are social phenomena that can be analysed and described. Additionally, mimetic approach is used in conducting the study since this approach analyses literary work by seeing how reality and human life are imitated, reflected, or represented in the work (Abrams 62-63). This fits *Lovecraft Country* novel that reflects reality and the history of Jim Crow laws era in the United States. The focus of this research is racial prejudice and discrimination. Thus, it suits multicultural criticism because the purpose of the criticism is to identify and analyze the literary

works of racial and ethnic minorities (Dobie 344). There are many theories from multicultural criticism. For this study, however, the researcher decided to Allport's rejective behaviours theory and Mellor's responses to racism theory.

The researcher has done several steps in order to collect the data of this study. The steps include reading *Lovecraft Country* novel carefully multiple times and by writing down narrations and dialogues related to the research questions. The first research question is about the rejective behaviours portrayed in *Lovecraft Country* novel which the researcher analyzed and answered by using Allport's theory. The second question, on the other hand, is about the portrayal of African-American responses to the rejective behaviours and it is answered by using Mellor's theory.

D. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

1. Rejective Behaviours and Its Responses

There are rejective behaviours found in *Lovecraft Country* novel. The rejective behaviours directed towards African-American characters in the story include: verbal rejection (antilocution), discrimination, and physical attack. The African-American characters expressed several responses to those behaviours, such as defensive responses, controlled responses, and confrontational responses. A few examples of rejective behaviours and its responses are discussed thoroughly below.

a. Verbal Rejection

One case of verbal rejection was represented in the confrontation between Atticus and the owner of the house he stayed in when he was in Ardham. The latter was Samuel Braithwhite, and the man had told his employees to cater to Atticus, Letitia, and George's needs during their stay. Suspicious of the whites' hospitality, Atticus decided to wander around the house and came across the information that his father had been confined in the basement. Then he went to the house owner's son, Caleb and demanded to meet Samuel. He was neither surprised nor pleased to see Atticus, but he tried to make a judgment about Atticus by looking at him from head to toe. After asking a few questions, Atticus discovered Samuel had a plan to resurrect an ancestor, however, to execute it successfully he needed Atticus. It was why he provided hospitality to Atticus and the others then revealed his distaste for the black.

"All that, for Titus Braithwhite. But at the same time, yes, you're Turner, the Negro. And that I have no particular respect for. I'll tolerate it—in my house, even in my presence—for the sake of the other; but my tolerance isn't infinite, and you're already testing the limits" (Ruff 87).

Based on what he said, he only treated Atticus and the others respectfully and catered to their needs, because of his plan, which was to resurrect someone. It was proven by his own speech: "all that, for Titus Braithwhite" (Ruff 87). If it was not for his goal, he would not have provided nourishment, entertainment, and comfort for Atticus and the others. Samuel was being courteous toward Atticus with an

underlying intention and openly admitted he had “no particular respect” at the fact Atticus was a black man. Samuel’s offhanded remark was considered an insult to the black since he implied black people did not deserve his respect and he only tolerated it for his own gain. This was also a verbal expression that showed his disdain toward the black. Samuel’s action was classified as verbal rejection because he made an offensive statement which indirectly insulted the black.

With his father being held captive, Atticus could only hold back his emotions. Outwardly, he appeared composed and calmly asked to see his father, when in fact, he was seething with rage. It was evident from the narration: “Immune, Atticus thought, **hands itching to turn into fists. Be interesting to test the limits of that**” (Ruff 72). His action, which is “hands itching to turn into fists”, was a sign of his repressed anger. Atticus could not show his anger due to his father’s captivity and for the fear of endangering his father because testing Samuel’s patience could jeopardize his safety. His unwillingness to show his emotion was categorized as controlled response.

b. Discrimination

One portrayal of discrimination is depicted after Letitia moved into a house in a white neighborhood. She was walking through the street when a car drove slowly alongside her. The driver was a blond boy who kept calling and following Letitia despite being ignored. She tried to walk away. However, it was futile because he seemed to be keen to bother her by swerving into the sidewalk to stop her from leaving. The boy, along with the other white boys in the passenger seat, then got out of the car which was followed by an altercation between her and the white boys.

“You should learn to be more polite,” the blond boy was saying. “I mean, we’re just trying to be friendly. And here you are, walking around alone, at night, **in someone else’s neighborhood.**”

“It’s my neighborhood too.”

“No, it isn’t.” He raised a hand as though to strike her and then held it, inches from her face. “**You don’t belong here.** You—” (Ruff 109).

The boy’s discrimination against black people caused him to treat Letitia unfairly. Her occupancy in his neighborhood, where white people live, infuriated him. He mistreated her by telling her she was walking around in someone else’s neighborhood and she did not belong there. It was proven by his remark that implied black people did not deserve to live in the same place as the whites. His remark could also be interpreted as an attempt to intimidate her into leaving the district. Therefore, the boy’s harassment, which was motivated by the fact Letitia was a black woman living in the same area as his, was identified as an act of discrimination.

Letitia answered the boy’s discriminatory action by retaliating. When being told she was walking around in someone else’s neighborhood, she retorted by saying it was hers as well. Her reply was enough of a response. However, there was

more to it since the boy almost hit her because of his anger but he was stopped by Letitia's dog.

The shepherd lunged forward barking and snapping, and the blond boy danced back, saying, "Hey... Hey... Hey!" this time in a higher register. **Letitia waited until the dog had the blond boy pinned against the side of the Oldsmobile and then did a slow count to ten** (Ruff 109).

As revenge, she let her dog attack him by barking and snapping at him. This went on for a few seconds until she deemed the boy has been punished enough. Letitia's retaliation, replying him and letting her dog pounce on him, could be identified as a confrontational response.

c. Physical Attack

A depiction of physical attack was during Atticus and George's arrival at Devon County. The county's sheriff and two of his deputies ambushed them as they were passing the area to go to Ardham. It was not an exaggeration to say it was an ambush since they used excessive force to confront the two black men by using the butts of their guns to smash in the side windows. They vandalized George's car by breaking the windows then followed by a similar scene in the first case of physical attack, in which is they gave Atticus and George a rough treatment as they ordered the latter out of the car:

The next few moments unfolded with a **grim familiarity**: They were **ordered from the car; struck; screamed at; searched; struck again**; and finally marched to the back of the Packard and made to sit on the rear bumper with their hands behind their heads and their feet crossed in front of them (Ruff 48).

Based on the passage above, their actions illustrated the use of violence on the black men. First, the sheriff ordered them out of the car while the deputies held them at gunpoint. Then these three lawmen also beat and screamed at them before they searched them. They inflicted harm to Atticus and George, treating them as if the latter were criminals because of the sheriff's unjustifiable conviction and prejudice that they were the rumored black car thieves from the neighboring town. Therefore, the lawmen's prejudiced aggression against the two depicted the image of rejective behaviour, particularly the physical attack.

Atticus and George, in response, did not show any apparent reaction to the physical attack. As indicated from the phrase "grim familiarity" when the violent incident was described, they were already accustomed to being mistreated, regardless of how terrible they felt at that moment. They knew fighting back might worsen the situation which was why they did not do anything but let it happen when they were beaten and screamed at. Their lack of response and apathy against the abuse could still be considered as a defensive response since they did not do anything in order to protect themselves from further harm.

2. Discussion

This study discovered that Matt Ruff's *Lovecraft Country* novel contained topics or themes that can be analyzed using Allport's theory and all of the types of rejective behaviours are discovered in the novel. In spite of that, there was merely one character who is the victim to all of the rejective behaviours in the story. He was Atticus Turner, the protagonist of the story who went on a road trip to locate his missing father. His journey caused him to interact with white people more often than the other characters, which led to the inevitability of encountering such behaviours. Meanwhile, the other characters only suffered one or two types. There was even one character who did not suffer any of the rejective behaviours because of his lack of interaction with the whites. He was Atticus' father, Montrose. However, it did not mean that other characters are not treated with the same amount of rejection as Atticus. It might not be told within the story due to their roles as minor characters.

Furthermore, the researcher also found some discovery regarding the characters' responses to the rejective behaviours. First, Atticus and Letitia's responses fell into all of the categories Mellor has suggested, albeit with different frequency for how often Atticus faced white people. Defensive and controlled appeared to be the general types that Atticus' actions classified into. Then, George and Horace tended to respond defensively. It was because the former was a levelheaded man who traveled frequently, thus, he met white people on numerous occasions and was used to being subjected to rejective behaviours for a long time.

In addition, Horace was a timid young boy who was suffering from asthma and was helpless as he would get an asthma attack anytime he was confronted by the whites. For the other characters, their responses relied on the situation they were in. In one case, Ruby chose to be defensive by being cooperative to the police after being falsely accused of stealing. Another one, in anger, Hippolyta's act falls into confrontational category since she was holding the white man who insulted her at gunpoint. Lastly, there was one character, namely Montrose, who did not represent any response. While he openly expressed his distaste toward the whites, he did not have direct contact with the white throughout the story. Therefore, it was impossible to identify his response seeing as rejective behaviours towards him are nonexistent within the story.

E. CONCLUSION

There are several conclusions that can be made based on the research problems of this study. First, all the types of rejective behaviours are portrayed in *Lovecraft Country* novel, they include verbal rejection, discrimination, and physical attack. These behaviours were carried out by the white people in the novel. In one case, a white man verbally rejected Atticus by calling him "nigger" or "negro" with animosity behind it when refusing to sell his tires to the latter. These verbal rejections were typically followed by discriminatory acts, which was also done by white people. An example of it is the law enforcement officials who target some characters for suspicion of a crime merely because of their race. They pulled over

Atticus without a warrant when he was traveling and falsely accused Ruby for stealing. Some of these discriminatory behaviours led to physical attacks. The authorities, with their unfavourable view for the black people, used excessive force particularly when investigating the black for crimes. One instance of such practice include, a sheriff and his deputies gave Atticus and George a beating as well as holding them at gunpoint.

These rejective behaviours prompted varying responses from the characters, which were the victims to the conducts. The novel represented all the kinds of responses Mellor has proposed, such as defensive, controlled, and confrontational. The majority of the responses the characters expressed are defensive and controlled with a few confrontational for each category of rejective behaviour. This was quite unsurprising to find for a number of reasons. Acting in a way to defend oneself (defensive response) and suppressing emotions (controlled response) are very closely related since suppressing emotions can be considered as a way to protect oneself.

However, the differences between these two are the former is an unconscious, apathetic action, while the latter is a conscious, deliberate one. For instance, George and Atticus not saying or doing anything when being mistreated by a sheriff was regarded as defensive because the action instinctual that neither the emotional reaction nor the thought of retaliating crossed their minds. Alternatively, Atticus holding back his anger and walking away when a white man insulted him was seen as controlled since it is intentional. Additionally, the confrontational responses were typically expressed during life-threatening moments and/or when the character was capable of retaliating. For example, Atticus fired a warning shot while being chased by white people because he had a gun.

F. REFERENCES

Abrams, Meyer Howard, and Geoffrey Harpham. *A Glossary of Literary Terms*. 9th ed. Wadsworth Cengage Learning, 2011. Pdf.

Allport, Gordon Willard. *The Nature of Prejudice*. Addison-Wesley, 1954. Pdf

Arenge, Andrew, et al. "Poll: 64 Percent of Americans Say Racism Remains A Major Problem."

NBC News, 29 May 2018. Web. 10 Apr. 2019.

Dobie, Ann B. *Theory into practice: An introduction to literary criticism*. Cengage learning, 2011. Pdf.

Hannah-Jones, Nikole. "Segregation Now." *ProPublica*, 16 Apr. 2014. Web. 12 July 2019.

Mellor, David. "Responses to Racism: A Taxonomy of Coping Styles Used by Aboriginal

Australians.” *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry* 74.1 (2004): 56-71, *Wiley Online Library*. Pdf.

Nassaji, Hossein. “Qualitative and Descriptive Research: Data Type versus Data Analysis.”

Language Teaching Research 19.2 (2015): 129-132, *Wiley Online Library*. Pdf.

Orfield, Gary. “Reviving The Goal of An Integrated Society: A 21st Century Challenge.”

Harvard University Civil Rights Project. The Regents of the University California,

2009. Pdf

Rimmon-Kenan, Shlomith. *Narrative Fiction: Contemporary Poetics*. Routledge, 2003. Pdf.

Ruff, Matt. *Lovecraft Country*. Harper, 2016. Print.

Swaine, Jon, et al. “Young Black Men Killed by U.S. Police at Highest Rate in Year of 1,134 Deaths.” *The Guardian*, 31 Dec. 2015. Web. 10 Apr. 2019.