



## Representation of Racial Discrimination in Christina Hammond's Reed *The Black Kids*

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**Abstract.** This thesis analyzes the racially discriminatory experiences found in the novel *The Black Kids* by Christina Hammonds Reed by discussing three types of discrimination as identified by Fred L. Pincus: individual, institutional, and structural. In addition, this research examines how the main character, Ashley Bennett, copes with such discrimination using the dual-process model proposed by Lazarus and Folkman. A qualitative descriptive approach is employed, using the close reading technique to interpret the novel. The primary data consists mainly of narrative quotations from the novel, which serve to illustrate acts of discrimination and the psychological responses of the protagonist. Individual discrimination is experienced by Ashley through social exclusion, stereotyping, and verbal racial abuse by her schoolmates. Institutional discrimination is manifested in the biased practices within schools, policing, and the media. Meanwhile, structural discrimination is embedded within broader systems such as education, economics, and law, which continue to marginalize Black communities. Ashley's coping strategies involve both problem focused and emotion-focused approaches. She avoids maladaptive peer groups and engages in constructive actions (problem-focused), while also seeking emotional regulation through acceptance, self-reflection, and internalization (emotion-focused). Racial discrimination in the novel is portrayed as both a personal and systemic issue. Ashley's journey in confronting social injustice while searching for her identity in a racist society reveals the multifaceted challenges faced by Black youth, who must navigate both identity formation and resistance.

**Keywords :** Racial Discrimination, Coping Strategy, qualitative approach

### INTRODUCTION

Racial discrimination has become a popular topic due to increased public awareness, the role of social media, the impact of the pandemic, criticism of unfair social structures, and changes in educational approaches (Araujo, 2021). These issues continue to be relevant because they relate to social justice, human rights, and democracy. Therefore, the fight against racial discrimination is linked to the broader struggle for human rights and the preservation of democratic values. Pursuing social justice requires us to actively confront and overcome discriminatory practices to ensure that everyone is treated with dignity and respect, regardless of their race or ethnicity (Johnson, 2019). According to Castells (2012) digital media and social media allow for the rapid dissemination of information, including

documentation of racial injustice, which triggers discussion and social pressure for change. The Internet has become the space of social movements and counter-power, allowing marginalized voices to challenge dominant narratives.

Racism remains a persistent social problem rooted in beliefs that certain races are inherently superior or inferior. According to Dawkins (1989), racism is a belief system that devalues others based on racial difference, leading to social and economic inequality. Pincus (2000) further categorizes racism into individual, institutional, and structural forms, showing that it operates not only through personal prejudice but also through systemic policies and cultural norms.

Literature serves as a mirror reflecting these social realities. Christina Hammonds Reed's *The Black Kids* offers a compelling portrait of racial discrimination experienced by Black youth in 1990s Los Angeles. Through Ashley Bennett's perspective, the novel explores how racism shapes identity, belonging, and psychological well-being. This research aims to analyze the forms of racial discrimination depicted in *The Black Kids* and examine Ashley Bennett's strategies for coping with these injustices.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Fred L. Pincus (2000) describes three forms of discrimination. Individual discrimination involves personal prejudice and harmful behaviors, such as insults or violence. Institutional discrimination consists of policies and practices in organizations that systematically disadvantage racial minorities. Structural discrimination refers to societal systems and norms that perpetuate inequality without overt intent.

Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) Transactional Model of Stress and Coping distinguishes problem-focused coping, aimed at changing the stressor, from emotion-focused coping, which manages emotional responses to uncontrollable situations. In contexts of systemic racism, marginalized individuals often rely on both strategies to survive and adapt.

A sociological approach to literature emphasizes the relationship between texts and social structures. According to Wellek and Warren (1956), literature reflects and critiques the political, economic, and social realities of its time, making it a valuable medium for understanding racism and resistance.

1. **Individual Racial Discrimination:** Refers to discriminatory actions by one individual against another based on race. This includes personal prejudice, verbal insults, exclusion, or physical violence directed at someone because of their racial identity.
2. **Institutional Racial Discrimination:** Involves policies, practices, and procedures within organizations or institutions that systematically disadvantage certain racial groups. Examples include unequal access to education, biased hiring practices, or discriminatory policing.
3. **Structural Racial Discrimination:** Describes the broader social, economic, and cultural systems that maintain racial inequality over time. It operates through

entrenched norms and policies that, even without explicit intent, result in unequal opportunities and outcomes for racial minorities.

## **METHOD**

This study employs a sociological approach and descriptive qualitative design to interpret *The Black Kids* through close reading and textual analysis. The primary data source is the novel itself. Data collection involved identifying and classifying passages depicting racial discrimination and coping strategies. Analysis connected these findings to Pincus's theory of discrimination and Lazarus and Folkman's coping model, resulting in a thematic interpretation of the novel's social critique.

## **RESULT AND DISCUSSION**

This novel is analyzed within the context of racial discrimination, specifically focusing on the three forms identified as individual racial discrimination, institutional racial discrimination and structural racial discrimination describes how the main characters Ashley Bennett's Struggle against Racial Discrimination at Los Angeles. *The Black Kids* offers a layered critique of racism as not merely personal prejudice but a systemic problem embedded in institutions and social structures. Ashley Bennett's struggle illustrates how Black youth face pressures to conform, internalize guilt, and navigate exclusion while developing strategies to survive and resist. Lazarus and Folkman's framework helps explain how she uses both problem-focused and emotion-focused coping to manage the stress of racism, showing the complexity of psychological adaptation in a racially stratified society.

### **Individual Racial Discrimination**

According to Pincus (2000), individual discrimination occurs when someone treats another person unfairly because of race, and is often expressed through direct actions such as insults, exclusion, or violence. In *The Black Kids*, Christina Hammonds Reed presents several examples in which the main character, Ashley Bennett, and other Black characters experience such treatment, particularly in their interactions with White people, including friends, classmates, and strangers. "IN THE news, they kept playing the video. Police beat black men with their boots and sticks on their soft and hard bodies, until I think they felt like they were really destroying them, and, sure enough (Reed, 2020:7)."

The quotation above shows the police violence against the black man, which reflects racial discrimination based on systemic violence and state brutality.. Black men are not treated as full human beings, but only as bodies that can be destroyed. This most extreme form of racial discrimination strips away human dignity.

### **Institutional Racial Discrimination**

Institutional discrimination is revealed in school policies and policing practices. Black students at Ashley's school are primarily recruited for sports, reinforcing stereotypes about Black physicality. Differential treatment by police, such as disproportionate

scrutiny and racial profiling, highlights systemic biases embedded in public institutions. In *The Black Kids*, Ashley faces this form of discrimination, which affects her life both directly and indirectly. Institutional racial discrimination refers to forms of discrimination that occur within social systems, structures and institutions that are supposed to be neutral and fair, but instead reinforce racial inequality.

"LaShawn and most of the other black kids who attend our school get scholarships, usually for basketball or soccer. They ran fast and jumped high and caught and passed the right way. The other girls admired the scholarship players with their brown skin and tops, all wanting to "Be Like Mike" (Reed, 2020: 58).

The quote above shows that the majority of black students at Ashley's school only gained a place through sports, not academics. This reflects a form of institutional discrimination in the education system, where black students are only seen as having "value" through physical ability, not intelligence. School institutions, while not explicitly discriminating, reinforce social norms and systems that limit the role of black students in certain fields, especially sports.

### **Structural Racial Discrimination**

Structural discrimination operates through social norms and economic systems that limit Black upward mobility. Despite her family's middle-class status, Ashley's family faces skepticism about home ownership in white neighborhoods. Economic and legal inequalities persist regardless of class, showing how racial hierarchy is maintained systemically.

Everything would've been fine if Ash wasn't with us," Kimberly says, laughing, as we walk back to her place. "Otherwise we'd totally have gotten away with it. 'Cause you're Black," she says by way of explanation." (Reed, 2020: 59).

The quotation describes racism as particularly damaging because it is not always visible or intentional, yet it deeply affects how individuals of marginalized racial groups live, move, and are perceived in society. Structural discrimination reinforces inequality not just through actions, but through systemic inaction—such as the failure to question or reform biased norms and institutions. how Ashley becomes a target of structural racial discrimination.

### **Coping Strategies to Struggle against Racial Discrimination**

Ashley's responses reflect Lazarus and Folkman's model. Problem-focused coping includes distancing herself from racist peers and seeking healthier friendships. Emotionfocused coping is more prominent, involving acceptance, reflection, and reappraisal. Ashley learns to manage her emotional responses to experiences she cannot control, using internal strength to maintain her sense of self.

Coping strategies are cognitive and behavioral efforts that individuals use to manage perceived pressure or stress, especially when facing situations that are stressful or exceed personal resources. This concept was developed by Richard S. Lazarus and Susan Folkman (1984) in their theory known as the Transactional Model of Stress and

Coping. According to them, coping is not a passive response, but rather an active endeavor that is constantly changing, depending on how a person assesses the situation and their ability to deal with it.

1. **Problem-Focused Coping:** Problem-focused coping involves intentional efforts to address or change the source of stress. It includes planning, problem-solving, and taking actions to reduce or eliminate the stressor.
2. **Emotion-Focused Coping:** Emotion-focused coping involves strategies to manage the emotional response to stress. It includes techniques such as acceptance, reframing, and seeking emotional support to reduce psychological distress.

### **Problem-Focused Coping**

According to Lazarus and Folkman (1984), problem-focused coping is a strategy of dealing with stress by changing or overcoming the source of stress directly. This strategy is used when individuals assess that the situation can still be controlled, and the main focus is on concrete actions such as finding solutions, planning actions, or changing the social environment.

In *The Black Kids*, Ashley Bennett shows several forms of problem-focused coping to deal with the racial discrimination she experienced, especially in the social, educational and family spheres. One of the clearest examples is when she stays away from toxic friendships that demean her because of her race. "You must be thinking of another black girl," I say, and head back to the quad. "Do you mind if I join you?" (Reed, 2020:232). The quotation explains when she chooses to sit with Jabba, a black student who is usually considered a "nerd" and shunned. This is Ashley's conscious action to break out of her old friendship group full of microaggressions, and get closer to a fellow minority who understands her position better. This reflects direct action to seek a healthier social environment - a typical form of problem-focused coping.

### **Emotion Focused Coping**

According to Lazarus and Folkman (1984), emotion focused coping is a coping strategy used when individuals feel that the situation at hand cannot be changed or is beyond their control. The focus of this strategy is managing emotional responses, rather than addressing the source of the problem directly. Forms of this strategy include acceptance, distraction, seeking emotional support, and personal reflection.

In *The Black Kids*, Ashley Bennett often uses emotion-focused coping as a form of response to social pressure and discrimination that is systemic and difficult to change directly. This is especially the case when she faces traumatic experiences or when she lacks the power to openly fight discrimination. One notable example of emotion-focused coping occurred when Ashley internalized her childhood racial experiences, when she is not allowed to play mermaid because she is black. "Now, we're going to play mermaids. Except Ashley. Because Black people can't be mermaids!" Then she giggled... The shame of that moment dug itself into my chest so deep that I couldn't breathe." (Reed, 2020:113).

The quotation shows Ashley does not fight back verbally or physically, but rather holds back her emotions and absorbs the shame internally. She did not have the ability at that age to change the situation, so she chose to suppress her feelings. This reflects the coping forms of emotional suppression and acceptance.

### **Ashley Bennett's Struggle against Racial Discrimination**

This part presents the analysis How does Ashley Bennett struggle against racial discrimination in the novel Christina Hammonds Reed's *The Black Kids*.. The main character Ashley Ashley Bennett, the main character in Christina Hammonds Reed's *The Black Kids*, experiences racial discrimination in various forms that reflect how society views and treats black individuals in America, especially in predominantly white neighborhoods. Ashley's struggle against discrimination involves personal experience, inner conflict, rejection of her own identity, and attempts to accept and understand who she is in an unfair socio-political context.

"Those idiots..." My father sighed. "My physics teacher told us about Watts during the riots." "I didn't know you had a black teacher." "He is white. Or half white, I guess. Syria. She said her mother made her move on afterwards. Do you remember the Watts riots?" in the black area. You can't go anywhere. Back then people wrote 'Blood Brothers' on the wall to let people know that black people have it".(Reed, 2020:104)

The quote above describes how the historical legacy of racial riots (Watts Riots) and perceptions of the black community still impact the main character's family's social relationships and views on racism. In this conversation, Ashley asks if Parker is still out all day, and her father satirizes the people involved as "idiots." Feagin explains that systemic racism is the result of social structures and policies that have historically excluded certain racial groups. From the perspective of Lazarus and Folkman's coping theory, Ashley's father's response of apathy and turning his attention to the television screen can be seen as a form of avoidance coping, which is avoiding emotional engagement with a tense racial situation.

"Ronnie and Aunt Eudora divorced a few years ago, and Eudora moved all the way to Las Vegas. Now Ronnie is a single dad trying to succeed in the world, which I am Guessing in the middle of a riot means making sure his livelihood doesn't burn". (Reed, 2020:109).

The quotation explains how internalized racism and beauty standards based on skin color (colorism) still heavily influence the worldview and dynamics within the black family itself, as well as how the social pressures of racism impact the family's condition during social crises such as riots. Although the protagonists realize that they are not objectively dark, the social construction still makes them feel "less" compared to their lighter-skinned siblings. The protagonist recalls when her cousins, Morgan and Tanya, lived with them.

### **CONCLUSION**

This chapter provides conclusion of the analysis of the portrayals of racial discrimination and how the main characters Ashley Bennett struggle against racial discrimination that occurs in the novel Christina Hammonds Reed's *The Black Kids*. After analyzing the

novel, it can be concluded that there are three forms of racial discrimination that occur in the novel *The Black Kids*. The first is individual racial discrimination and the second is Institutional racial Discrimination the third is Structural racial discrimination.

Individual racial discrimination involves It is a form of discrimination perpetrated by one individuals against another based on his or her race. This means that it is the act of one person hurting or treating another individual unfairly because of racial differences, usually direct and personal. This scene reflects how individualized discrimination is not only verbal insults, but also physical actions that humiliate and dehumanize a person because of the color of his or her skin. This leads to shame, alienation, and identity confusion.

Institutional racial discrimination is a form of discrimination that is not perpetrated by individuals directly, but rather by institutions or social systems through rules, policies, or practices that systematically disadvantage certain racial groups-particularly black people. Reed describes how Institutional racial discrimination occur at Los Angeles. The police at Los Angeles When Ashley and her friends are stopped by the police after being caught swimming on someone else's property. The novel also presents the reality of the black community in Los Angeles who live in poverty, limited access to education and employment, and inadequate housing. In *The Black Kids*, Reed also discusses how the main characters Ashley Bennett struggle against racial discrimination they face.

Structural racial discrimination forms of discrimination that arise from interconnected social systems, such as economics, education, housing, health and law, that collectively and continuously create racial inequality. Structural racial discrimination encompasses entire social systems that work in concert to distribute benefits to the white majority and disadvantage minority groups, particularly the black community. Christina Hammonds Reed portrays these conditions through the novel's setting in the city of Los Angeles in 1992, where the characters face various forms of discrimination that seem small but stem from a larger system.

Structural racial discrimination in *The Black Kids* reveals that racism is not just a matter of individual hatred, but a matter of system and historical legacy. Christina Hammonds Reed shows that the social system in America - in law, education, and the economy - is still not neutral, and still strongly favors the dominant group. This makes how does Ashley Bennett struggle against racial discrimination because the challenges faced are not only from individuals, but from a system that is entrenched and difficult to change.

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