

RACIAL DISCRIMINATION PORTRAYED IN KEN LIU'S SHORT STORY: *THE PAPER MENAGERIE*

Socha Salsabila^{1*}, Nurholis²

^{1,2}Universitas Islam Negeri Sunan Gunung Djati Bandung, Indonesia

*Corresponding email address: socha.salsabila03@gmail.com

Abstract

The Paper Menagerie is a short story tells the story of a Chinese-American boy named Jack who has a Chinese immigrant mother. This research reveals a character portrait of Jack and his mother who received racial treatment from the environment in which they lived. This research was conducted based on the discrimination perspective proposed by Newman. This research uses a qualitative descriptive research method with the material object of a short story by Ken Liu entitled *The Paper Menagerie*. Based on the sociological theory of literary and cultural studies, this research reveals that "*The Paper Menagerie*" is not just a story about magical origami, but also displays a reflection of social reality, where racial discrimination and the identity crisis are still relevant issues. This research succeeded in finding several forms of discrimination from story narratives. Racial discrimination is divided into physical abuse and verbal expression are the main topics in the research. Discrimination occurs and leaves an impact and influence in the form of a lack of identity crisis on the main character. The portrait of the main character's identity crisis can be found and analyzed in the short story narrative text.

Keywords: Discrimination, Ken Liu, Short Stories, *The Paper Menagerie*.

INTRODUCTION

One of the social topics that is widely circulated and discussed and has become controversial in people's lives is discrimination. This problem arises due to a lack of recognition or acceptance of individual differences and diversity, such as differences in biological aspects in appearance, especially physical aspects such as body shape, face shape, eye shape hair, and skin color (Ariesta & Muliastuti, 2017). Racism is part of a sequence of discrimination. Based on the Consumer News and Business Channel (CNBC) article, Syahputra stated that the United States is the first country with a fairly high percentage of racism (Syahputra, 2022). According to research conducted by Saputri in 2020, the history of racism in United States has recorded various violations of a racial nature from the past to the present. Cases of racism have a significant impact on various sectors, including the economy, education and health sectors.

In United States, social history is shaped by racism based on prejudice and discrimination (Saputri, 2020). Racial discrimination is nothing new in the United States,



in fact racial discrimination has existed and occurred for centuries. According to Theodorson, quoted in Fulthoni et al (2009), discrimination is an action that refers to unfair treatment of individuals or groups based on factors such as race, ethnicity and religion. Discrimination goes hand in hand with the context of society which is triggered with differences in the social environment, thereby hindering the creation of justice for individuals and groups in society.

According to Newman, as quoted in the Journal of Jantera Literary Studies, Patiraja (2017) explains that discrimination is divided into several forms, including verbal expression, physical abuse, avoidance, exclusion and extermination. In literary theory, although it is considered impossible for an author to accurately represent a particular life or era as a whole, the author's role is to convey his experiences and perspective on life (Wellek & Warren, 2013). This shows that the facts presented are the result of various concrete problems and situations faced by humans, and not just as meaning makers (Faruk, 2012). According to Swingewood and Laurenson (1972), literature is considered a reflection of the times, describing social phenomena as imitations to understand the social conditions of that time.

One of the literary works that offend on the issue of racial discrimination is the short story entitled *The Paper Menagerie*, written by the author from the United States, Ken Liu. Jack is the main character, a boy who representation the life of a Chinese-American boy who has a Chinese immigrant mother who is not fluent in English and has a victim of racial discrimination in the neighborhood where he lives. Jack's mother, who is a native Chinese citizen, often receives criticism from her neighbors in the United States just because she is of a different race. Jack, who has Chinese ancestry, has not escaped public discussion because he has a biracial appearance. Until one day, Jack received racist remarks from another boy, Mark, a neighbor who was the same age as him. Mark said several racial sentences to Jack just because Jack's origami broke Mark's Obi-Wan Kenobi action figure. Mark was so angry, he pushed Jack and said rude things about Jack, who was a child of Chinese descent.

The sociological theory of literature is quite often used to analyze the social context in which a literary work is created (Saludung, 2019, p. 6). Researchers seek to understand literary works as a reflection of society that reveals various existing social conflicts. Even though literary sociology and literature have the same object, that is the role of literature in society, they both have quite significant differences. Literary sociology is more focused on current reality, while literature tends to be more subjective, evaluative and imaginative (Ratna, 2013: 2).

Based on this background context, the author intends to examine the portrait of discrimination, where the main character focuses on discussing racial discrimination in physical and verbal forms. This research was created for literary sociology regarding socio-cultural problems related to discrimination. Discusses how the short story *The Paper Menagerie* by Ken Liu can discuss the narrative of racial discrimination that befell Jack and his mother and the impact it had on the victims of discrimination in the

characters of the short story *The Paper Menagerie* who have received forms of racial discrimination, both physical and verbal. Until explaining the connection between Ken Liu's background as the author of *The Paper Menagerie* and discrimination and the storyline.

Based on several studies, literary works can be researched through the sociological aspect of literature. De Bonald (in Wellek and Austin) expressed an opinion about the relationship between literature and society: "literature is an expression of society". This means that literature reflects and expresses life, that is the real relationship between society and literature, there is a relationship that is descriptive or non-normative. It is divided into three classifications. First, author sociology, author potential, and literary institutions. Relating to the main issues of economics, literary production, social background, author status, and author ideology which can be seen from various author activities outside of literary works. Second, the content of the literary work, it is aims and other matters implied in the literary work itself which relate to social issues. Third, reader problems and the social impact of literary works.

This classification is not much different from the classification carried out by Rene Wallek and Austin Warren (in Nurholis, 2019) who divided sociological literary criticism into three classifications. First, the sociology of the author, that is issues of social status, political ideology, and other matters that concern the author. Second, the sociology of literary works, which questions about a literary work. The points of criticism are the things implied in the literary work and the purpose or message to be conveyed. Third, literary sociology which questions readers and social influence on society.

This classification explains that there are three things included in the study of literary works, that is the social context of the author, literature as a "mirror" of society, and the social function of society. The mirror in this context is a representation depicted in literary works of the social environment. One of the things that happens in the social environment is discrimination which is described by Ken Liu in the narrative of the story.

Literary sociology here examines the issue of social impact and status in literary works. According to Nurholis social status is often referred to as a person's position, position, or rank in a social group which is defined as their relationship with the social environment, prestige, as well as rights and obligations (Nurholis, 2019). In connection with Soerjono Soekanto (1970, 239), status is basically classified into ascribed status, achieved status, and assigned status. The first is a person's position or position in society which is obtained automatically from birth or based on factors that cannot be changed such as birth, heredity or race. Second, Achieved status, which is a position obtained by a person through effort, struggle and personal achievement. Third, Assigned Status, which is a position given to someone as an award or recognition for certain services or contributions given to a group or society.

Various forms of discrimination experienced by the main character in the short story *The Paper Menagerie* are analyzed in narrative form. Through this research, it is also hoped that readers will be able to gain insight into understanding the analysis of

narratives which contain representations of racial discrimination that occurred to Jack and his mother in the short story *The Paper Menagerie* by Ken Liu and understand the impact that occurred on the two main characters as victims of racial discrimination. Readers are also expected to get information about the relationship between Ken Liu's background as the author of the short story *The Paper Menagerie* and discrimination in the story.

Discrimination is unfair treatment of a person or group of people based on certain characteristics such as race, religion, ethnicity, gender, or social status. For example, when someone is not treated the same as others because of their skin color, religious beliefs, or nationality, it is a form of discrimination.

According to Theodorson, discrimination refers to unfair treatment of individuals or groups, often based on characteristics such as race, religion, ethnicity, or social status. According to Fulthoni, there are several forms of discrimination that commonly occur in society, the first is discrimination based on race, ethnicity and religion. Second, discrimination based on sex or gender identity. Third, discrimination against individuals with disabilities. Fourth, discrimination against individuals living with HIV/AIDS, where they are often ostracized and considered a burden on society. Fifth, discrimination due to differences in social class. These forms of discrimination are types of discrimination that commonly occur in the context of society.

Discrimination refers to unfair treatment given to individuals based on certain social groups. When individuals or groups experience exclusion or restrictions, this can be considered a discriminatory act. So discrimination is often influenced by the environment in which the individual lives, as well as how the individual is viewed and accepted in that environment.

According to Newman as mentioned in Patiraja, discrimination is divided into five types, that is verbal discrimination which involves the use of words or insults; physical discrimination which includes hurting, hitting, or committing physical violence against individuals or groups based on race; avoidance involving efforts to avoid or stay away from certain disliked individuals or groups; excommunication involving the rejection or exclusion of certain individuals or groups from a group; and discrimination through eradication which includes efforts to reduce or eliminate certain individuals or groups through acts of violence or killing (Patiraja, 2017).

This research was conducted using a qualitative approach or method with qualitative descriptive analysis. The qualitative descriptive research method is a type of research that focuses on research on natural research objects based on facts or conditions that are not specified. According to Sugiyono (2013) qualitative research methods are a way to investigate an object in a natural way. This method is based on postpositivism, which means recognizing that knowledge about the world is relative. In qualitative research, researchers are the main thing directly involved in collecting and datum analyzing. Meanwhile, according to Walidin & Idris, qualitative research is a research method used to understand a phenomenon that occurs in life or society with the aim of

creating a picture that can be explained with words or narrative (Walidin & Idris, 2015). Researchers obtain detailed views directly from information sources, such as people involved in or experiencing the phenomenon. Qualitative research is carried out in natural or realistic settings, so that the information obtained reflects the actual conditions of the phenomenon being studied. Qualitative research has a descriptive nature and tends to use an inductive approach to analysis, so that processes and meanings based on the subject's perspective are more emphasized in this qualitative research (Fadil, 2020, p. 33).

The data produced using qualitative descriptive research methods is in the form of non-numerical information or a collection of words. According to Koentjaraningrat, descriptive research aims to provide a complete picture of individuals or groups with give an attention to the conditions observed (Koentjaraningrat, 1999). Therefore, a qualitative descriptive method was used in this research to collect data about various forms of discrimination and their impact on the characters who experienced discrimination in the short story "*The Paper Menagerie*" by Ken Liu.

This research uses primary data as the main material for conducting analysis. The *Menagerie Paper* by Ken Liu is the primary data in this research. Meanwhile, secondary data consists of reference sources such as books, articles and journals that are relevant to the research topic.

After determining the object to be analyzed, the researcher collects every data with reading the object repeatedly and carefully understanding all the details of the data in accordance with the discrimination theory put forward by Newman. The data analysis carried out included observation and research on the relationships between texts which reflect experiences of discrimination between characters, as well as the impact of discrimination experienced by the main character in the short story *The Paper Menagerie* by Ken Liu. Data objects are analyzed textually in the short story *The Paper Menagerie* by Ken Liu with an emphasis on correlations and relationships between narratives that reflect situations of discrimination between the characters, as well as the implications of the experience of discrimination experienced by the main character in the story. The technique applied is to examine the narrative with focusing on words, sentences and paragraphs that are relevant to the topic to be discussed.

Many studies have been conducted to analyze literary works using discrimination theory, but there is not any research has focused on similar material objects. Hang has conducted research with a similar object, that is An Analysis of the Reconstruction of Chinese American Identity in *The Paper Menagerie* (Hang, 2020). This research aims to find a reconstruction of the identity of the main character in the short story *The Paper Menagerie* by Ken Liu from a postcolonial perspective. Aims to provide solutions for Chinese Americans facing identity issues.

The next research was carried out by Ridha Rouabhia who conducted research with the same object, that is Cultural Identity and Intertextual Discourse: A Study of Paper Menagerie by Ken Liu (Rouabhia, 2024). This research was conducted using qualitative

methods with the aim of examining cultural identity negotiations and the dynamics of heritage languages.

There is also research from Dhitya Faradilla, that is Race Discrimination in Skin Short Story by Emily Bernard (Faradilla, 2023). This research was studied using qualitative descriptive methods to find discrimination that occurred in the narrative of the short story Skin by Emily Bernard.

The two initial studies used the same object but raised different topics, while the third study raised a similar topic with a different object, that is regarding discrimination that occurs to characters in short stories. It can be seen from previous research that the concept of racial discrimination in the short story *The Paper Menagerie* by Ken Liu has not been studied in depth. So this research can provide new insights, especially in the study of literary sociology.

FINDING AND DISCUSSION

Racial discrimination is an event or action where a person or group of people receives exceptions, distinctions and even restrictions based on race, descent, ethnicity, or even skin color. The discrimination that occurs results in reduced recognition of the freedoms that are the right of every human being as a basis for social equality. This action is described in the short story by Ken Liu entitled *The Paper Menagerie*. The short story *The Paper Menagerie* describes forms of discrimination against people of Chinese descent. The discrimination experienced by Chinese-Americans in this short story has an impact and influence on psychology, especially the self-acceptance (identity crisis) that occurs in the main character.

Chinese Culture in Story Narratives

Ken Liu is an American writer who was born in Lanzhou, China. When he was 11 years old, he and his family immigrated to America. They lived in California and Stonington, Connecticut before finally settling in Waterford, Connecticut. It is felt that Ken Liu has a life background that is quite similar to the main character, Jack.

"He flew back to Connecticut and began to apply for the papers for her to come to him. I was born a year later, in the Year of the Tiger." (Liu, 2016, p. 28).

At the beginning, it was told that Jack's father returned from China to America with bringing his mother to Connecticut. Until a year later Jack was born. Connecticut is the same place where Ken Liu lived when he first immigrated to America.

"When I was ten, we moved to a new house across town." (Liu, 2016, p. 29).

If Ken Liu moved to Connecticut, America at the age of eleven, Jack in the short story *The Paper Menagerie* moved to migrate at the age of ten. When they were teenagers, Ken Liu and Jack were similar in choosing to move and settle in a new city in America. In Nick Admussen's interview, Ken Liu revealed:

"I think I wrote the novel for myself. I don't really think of the novels as being about Chinese

culture specifically—the fact that they reflect a lot of it is simply because that's my culture.” (Admussen, 2019).

The fact that Ken Liu was born and grow in China makes him understand and aware of Chinese culture. In the short story *The Paper Menagerie* by Ken Liu, he is able to present well how strong Chinese culture is. Ken Liu pays great attention to small details in order to show the Chinese culture in this story.

“Zhe jiao zhezhi,” Mom said. This is called origami.” (Liu, 2016, p. 26).

Origami made by Jack's mother with various shapes such as tigers, goats, deer and buffalo is a portrait of the richness of Chinese culture and art that is hundreds of years old. According to Kompas Klasika, China was the country that first introduced the art of folding origami (zhezhi). One of the figures who played an important role in the development of origami in China was Ts'ai Lun, who was known as the inventor of paper. In 105 AD, he showed Emperor Ho Ti a sample of paper he had made from mulberry tree fibers.

“Mom was sitting in a chair, her side to the camera, wearing a tight green silk cheongsam.” (Liu, 2016, p. 27).

The short story *The Paper Menagerie* also tells the story of the cheongsam, a traditional Chinese clothing that was first introduced in the 17th century. Cheongsam generally takes the form of a long dress with various motifs. This traditional clothing is a detailed form of the portrait of traditional Chinese clothing in Ken Liu's short story.

“I was born a year later, in the Year of the Tiger.” (Liu, 2016, p. 28).

The use of years in this narrative also follows Chinese culture and traditions, where the third year in the 12-year Chinese lunar calendar is called the Year of the Tiger. The Year of the Tiger has meaning and significance for Chinese people's beliefs, that is courage, strength and fortitude.

“The shark lived happily in a large goldfish bowl.” (Liu, 2016, p. 29).

In the story narrative, Jack puts an origami shark into a goldfish bowl. Goldfish have an important meaning in ancient Chinese traditional practices (Feng shui), that is as a symbol of auspicious, prosperity and abundance. The goldfish bowl belonged to Jack's family. The goldfish bowl is a symbol of ancient Chinese traditional practices in the story.

“Focus on your life. Just keep that box you have in the attic with you, and every year, at Qingming, just take it out and think about me.” (Liu, 2016, p. 36).

There is also the term "Qingming" in the story narrative. Qiming is a traditional festival for visiting and cleaning graves in Chinese tradition which is commemorated by Chinese people to honor their deceased ancestors. Apart from various cultures and beliefs, Ken Liu also provides many narrative stories in Mandarin in the short story *The Paper Menagerie*.

"Laohu." *Look, a tiger.*" (Liu, 2016, p. 26).
 "Zhe jiao zhezhi," Mom said. *This is called origami.*" (Liu, 2016, p. 26).
 "Xuexiao hao ma?" Mom asked." (Liu, 2016, p. 32).
 "Sha jiao chink?" *What does chink mean?"* (Liu, 2016, p. 32).
 "Bu haochi?" *The food doesn't taste good?"* (Liu, 2016, p. 32).
 "Fashao la?" *Do you have a fever?"* (Liu, 2016, p. 33).
 "Mom looked at him. "If I say 'love,' I feel here." She pointed to her lips. "If I say 'ai,' I feel here." She put her hand over her heart." (Liu, 2016, p. 33).
 "Nin hui du zhongwen ma?" *Can you read Chinese?"* (Liu, 2016, p. 33).
 "Haizi, mama ai ni — " *Her cough took over again.*" (Liu, 2016, p. 38).

The narrative in Mandarin which was then translated back into English is a portrait of Jack's mother as a Chinese woman who is not fluent in English. This character is a representation of an object from Chinese society, so that it can be seen as a whole that the narrative in the short story *The Paper Menagerie* by Ken Liu is very strong in Asian-Chinese culture which is mixed with the background of American society. Ken Liu includes many small things in his short stories, especially the culture that occurs between Chinese and American. The background of Ken Liu as a writer who has a direct relationship with these two cultures will really understand how these two cultures can be expressed through the characters he wrote in the short story *The Paper Menagerie*.

Forms of Discrimination in the Short Story *The Paper Menagerie*

Discrimination is one of the forms of racial issues that often occur in society. Racial discrimination begins with a form of racial problem that often occurs in the social realm which is based on various kinds of differences that exist between groups or individuals which then become the cause of the emergence of various kinds of discrimination. The fate of being a person of Chinese descent and having biracial ancestry in American society provides opportunities for discrimination both physical and verbal.

Physical Abuse

Physical discrimination is a form of discriminatory treatment that involves hurting, hitting, or attacking someone regardless of gender. Physical discrimination will certainly have an impact on the victims.

"Laohu turned and pounced, knocking the plastic figure off the table. It hit the floor and broke and Obi-Wan's head rolled under the couch. "Rawwww," Laohu laughed. I joined him. Mark punched me, hard. "This was very expensive! You can't even find it in the stores now. It probably cost more than what your Dad paid for your Mom!" I stumbled and fell to the floor. Laohu growled and leapt at Mark's face. Mark screamed, more out of fear and surprise than pain. Laohu was only made of paper, after all. Mark grabbed Laohu and his snarl was choked off as Mark crumpled him in his hand and tore him in half." (Liu, 2016, p. 31).

When Laohu, Jack's origami shark, attacks Mark's Obi-Wan Kenobi action figure, Mark retaliates with punching Jack while saying that the price of his Obi-Wan Kenobi action figure is much more than the price his father paid for his mother. Mark also says

that Jack's paper menagerie is just Chinese trash. While Jack could not do anything apart accept all the words and treatment that Mark had given. Jack was pensive and took everything Mark had said to his heart.

Verbal Expression

Verbal discrimination is a person's action in convey insulting words with shouting, scolding or other forms that show discrimination against a particular group or individual who has several differences, one of these differences is racial differences.

"The neighbours conversed in the living room, not trying to be particularly quiet. "He seems like a normal enough man. Why did he do that?" (Liu, 2016, p. 29).

When Jack and his family moved, several neighbors visited him and his family. They looked confused for Jack's father. As though asking why that man could choose a Chinese woman as his wife, which seems to be an inappropriate action, that is marrying a Chinese woman. Jack heard questions from several neighbors, making the situation very painful. This discrimination did not only happen to Jack's mother, but also to Jack himself.

"Something about the mixing never seems right. The child looks unfinished. Slanty eyes, white face. A little monster." "Do you think he can speak English?" The women hushed." (Liu, 2016, p. 30).

Discrimination in the Chinese community in this short story does not only occur to the mother who is of pure Chinese descent, but also to her biracial child. When the neighbors talked about Jack's oriental facial features. They talked about Jack, who was white and slanted-eyed, as a little monster. The China Jack feature is considered something strange and bad for the majority of society.

"After a while they came into the dining room. "Hello there! What's your name?" "Jack," I said. "That doesn't sound very Chinese." Mom came into the dining room then." (Liu, 2016, p. 30).

When the neighbors tried to talk to Jack with asking his name. They did not seem to believe that Jack's name with a western accent seemed inappropriate for his biracial face. Racial discrimination also happened to Jack when he played with Mark.

"Here's your stupid cheap Chinese garbage." (Liu, 2016, p. 31).

At that time, Jack's paper menagerie attacked Mark's action figure and making him angry. However, the sentence Mark said when talking to Jack used the claim "Chinese" when denigrating Jack's paper menagerie. The "Chinese" claim made by Mark is like a portrait of discrimination carried out by Mark against Jack who has Chinese descent.

The Impact of Main Characters Experiencing Racial Discrimination

Discrimination in the short story *The Paper Menagerie* by Ken Liu begins when Jack's family moves to America and two neighbors come to welcome them. Instead of welcoming them, the two neighbors started talking to each other about Jack's family who having Chinese ancestry. Jack heard and received discrimination from his two neighbors,

feeling a lack of self-confidence and not accepting himself as a child of Chinese descent.

"I looked into the mirror. I look nothing like her, nothing. At dinner I asked Dad, "Do I have a chink face?" Dad put down his chopsticks." (Liu, 2016, p. 32).

This narrative describes Jack's character Jack who begins to question himself about his physical condition. He felt like he did not want to be like his mother who came from China. Until Jack tried to abandon his Chinese lineage. He told his mother several times not to speak Mandarin to him and to start learning to cook American food.

"I pushed the chopsticks and the bowl before me away: stir-fried green peppers with five-spice beef. "We should eat American food." Dad tried to reason. "A lot of families cook Chinese sometimes." "We are not other families." I looked at him. Other families don't have Moms who don't belong." (Liu, 2016, p. 32).

"I brushed her hand away. "I'm fine. Speak English!" I was shouting." (Liu, 2016, p. 33).

Until it ends, Jack as a child of Chinese descent, tried to stay away from everything about Chinese and the culture. He felt happiest living as an American citizen.

"I would hurry on to my room, where I could continue my all-American pursuit of happiness." (Liu, 2016, p. 33).

Even until Jack grew up and became a student college. At that time, Jack's mother was sick and lying down because of cancer in her body. Jack's mother wholeheartedly agreed for Jack to go back. But Jack happily left his mother to return to America.

"I reached out to touch her hand, because I thought that was what I was supposed to do. I was relieved. I was already thinking about the flight back, and the bright California sunshine." (Liu, 2016, p. 35).

Several months later, Jack found a letter in Mandarin which he found inside a crumpled piece of wrapping paper with the plain side facing up and filled with thick Chinese characters. A letter from his dead mother. Jack went to Qingming to ask someone to read the letter. The letter contains about the life of the mother who came from a poor family in China. Until finally the mother met the father through a catalogue.

The letter tells about the love that mother gave to Jack, how she cried for hours when Jack said his first Mandarin words until her disappointment when Jack decided not to speak to him in Mandarin anymore.

"The language that I had tried to forget for years came back, and I felt the words sinking into me, through my skin, through my bones, until they squeezed tight around my heart." (Liu, 2016, p. 38).

The impact of the discrimination that occurred on Jack's character made him not accept his oriental facial features and decided not to speak Mandarin, making Jack sever his relationship with the various Chinese things and culture he owned. Jack determines America as the only culture he wants to have. Until without realizing it, he left half of himself behind. The identity he was born with.

CONCLUSION

The portrait of racial discrimination is depicted through the narrative of events contained in the short story *The Paper Menagerie* by Ken Liu. Discrimination in the story explains and alludes to the depiction of racial discrimination in the social environment. America is the country with the highest level of discrimination based on data presented by the Consumer News and Business Channel (CNBC). The narrative in the short story *The Paper Menagerie* depicts several Americans who have a negative view of Chinese people and their descendants. Physical discrimination and verbal discrimination occur from adults to children. Like Jack, an 11 year old child and his mother who experienced discrimination because they were born of Chinese descent. The acts of discrimination faced by the two main characters affect their lives and have a big impact, especially on Jack's life. Jack becomes less self-accepting (identity crisis) as being of Chinese descent. So he chose America as the only culture he wanted to have. It took years for him to realize that all the personalities he had were his true self. Chinese and American have been his identity since birth. He should not have to choose between the two or even be embarrassed. Because both of them are him.

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