

RACIAL OPPRESSION TOWARDS AFRICAN-AMERICAN SLAVES IN JOH KORTY'S *THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF MISS JANE PITTMAN* MOVIE

NASRUN JUHAIDI¹, SRI MINDA MURNI²
¹²UNIVERSITAS NEGERI MEDAN

Abstract

*The objectives of this study were to find out 1) To investigate and explain the types of racial oppression occurred in the movie *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman*, and 2) To describe how the characters resisted the racial discrimination aimed to them in the movie *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman*. The data are analyzed in descriptive qualitative approach. The data of this research were from the utterance of *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman* movie characters. The data were taken from all the utterances, including monologues, dialogues, and narrations from the script which is already transcribed from the movie. The result of this research showed that 1) there are four types of oppressions that happened in the movie, namely: Exploitation with a total number of 2 utterances (6.7%), Marginalization with a total number of 10 utterances (33.3%), Powerlessness with a total number of 6 utterances (20%), and violence with a total number of 12 utterances (40%). 2) There are three types of resistance that are used by the characters, namely: Acquiescence with a total number of 5 utterances (31.25%), violence resistance with a total number of 4 utterances (25%), Non-Violence Resistance with a total number of 7 utterances (43.75%),*

Keywords: Movie, Oppression, Resistance, The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman

INTRODUCTION

Racism is a serious problem not only in a certain place like America but all over the world. The concept of racism itself is based on the terms of ethnicity, which is often used in sense close to human groups based on qualities assumed to be essential or innate to the group (e.g. derived from the same ancestor or shared the same characteristics or behavior that differ them from other groups). The most known subject of racism is skin color which represents a certain race, i.e. the Afros, a race-derived from Africa that migrated to America represented with dark skin or the Indians which is the native American society represented by red skin.

The process of abusing human beings, whether mentally or physically that the owner of the slaves did can be called an act of oppression. Oppression itself can be defined as an act of tyranny to an individual or a certain group of people by ruler or tyrant that forces them to be restricted in a certain way or limiting their freedom which resulted in immobilizing them (Young, 1990).

To fight and defend themselves from unpleasant treatment, people do what is called as resisting, a countering force to racial oppression. According to Martin Luther King, Jr., resistance to oppression can be divided into three forms, Acquiescence, Violence resistance, and Non-violence resistance which he distinguished based on the way the oppressed deal with the oppression they experienced (King, 2010).

In the film of “The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman”, the atmosphere of slavery and segregation is well preserved. A certain group of people was being marginalized and exploited due to their skin color and ancestors of being the slave of the majority. The film chronologically told the story of a woman from an early age and being a young adult through slavery until the very end of her life. All the experiences she has gone through her life are specifically explained to help to express the idea of slave life at the early age of the 20th century. The main character is a woman in the era of slavery in America post the “Cuban war” between Spanish and Americans that built up the hatred of colored people by the whites.

LITERATURE REVIEW

A. Literature and Film

Literature is an expression of how humans express themselves in the form of imaginative written or oral works based on opinions, thoughts and experiences wrapped in aesthetics through the media of language (Sumardjo & Saini, 1997). Literature is not just an artifact but a living thing that dynamically grows with other elements like politics, economics, arts, and culture meaning in fact, literature is flexible and influenced by the surroundings (Saryono, 2009).

Sumardjo and Saini (1993) stated that literature can be divided into two major divisions which are imaginative literature that can further be divided into poetry and prose, and non-imaginative literature. Beside all the divisions of literary works stated by Sumardjo and Saini, Klarer in his book *An Introduction to Literary Studies* (2004) stated that film is predetermined by literary techniques; conversely, literary practice developed particular features under the impact of film. Many of the dramatic forms in the twentieth century have evolved in interaction with film, whose means of photographic depiction far surpass the means of realistic portrayal in the theatre. Film includes literary works and all kinds of film presentation modes according to the features of literary text and can also be explained in a textual framework. In short, film is an upgrade of textual literature to a visual literature (Klarer, 2004).

B. Racism and Racial Oppression

Racism cannot be defined without first defining race. Among social scientists, ‘race’ is generally understood as a social construct. Although biologically meaningless when applied to

humans – physical differences such as skin color have no natural association with group differences in ability or behaviour (Clair & Denis, 2015).

Racism is the belief that groups of humans possess different behavioral traits as the result of different physical appearance, and can be divided based on the superiority of one race over another. It may also mean prejudice, discrimination, or antagonism directed against other people because they are of a different race or ethnicity.

C. Prejudice

Prejudice, just like attitudes in general, involves cognitive, affective, and behavioral aspects. The cognitive aspect concerns evaluative beliefs about characteristics of the group in question or its members of prejudiced and can be expressed by seeing a group and its members as cold and hostile, as incompetent and weak, or as negative on both dimensions; the affective aspect concerns emotional reactions including positive and negative effect, where prejudice can be reflected in the presence of negative affect as well as in the absence of positive affect; and the behavioral aspect refers to tendencies or intentions to show discriminatory behavior that consists of approach and avoidance tendencies or tendencies to discriminate. Negative approach tendencies refer to various forms of active behavior such as harassment, physical violence, and anti - locution (a mild form of hate speech). Negative avoidance tendencies refer to various forms of passive behavior such as neglect, withholding social support, avoiding intimacy, and preserving social distance from a group and its members (Christie, 2012).

D. Oppression

Oppression refers to the situation where people are suffering some inhibitions because of inability to express themselves or develop their capabilities and opportunities because they are a part of a particular group. Many groups are known for being oppressed by another group, for instance (1) People of color like afros or Indians, (2) LGBTQs, (3) Jews, (4) Disabled, (5) Working class people, and (6) Young and old people

According to Young (1990), there are five “faces” or types of oppressions. Each type has its own way to show how injustice is. The types themselves are exploitation, marginalization, powerlessness, cultural imperialism, and violence.

Exploitation is the act of using people’s labors to produce profit while not compensating them fairly. Exploitation uses capitalism to oppress. Marginalization is the act of relegating or confining a group of people to a lower social standing or outer limit or edge of society. Overall, it is a process of exclusion. Powerlessness links to Marx’s theory of socialism: some people “have” power while others “have-not”. The powerless are dominated by the ruling class and are situated to take orders and rarely

have the right to give them. Cultural Imperialism involves taking the culture of the ruling class and establishing it as the norm. The groups that have power in society control how the people in that society interpret and communicate. Those who are oppressed by cultural imperialism are both marked by stereotypes and made to feel invisible. Violence is probably the most obvious and visible form of oppression. Members of some groups live with the knowledge that they must fear random, unprovoked attacks on their persons or property. These attacks do not necessarily need a motive but are intended to damage, humiliate, or destroy the person (Young, 1990).

E. Resistance

Martin Luther King Jr. during the Civil Rights movement brought about many different views on how one's oppression should be handled in America. *The Ways of Meeting Oppression*, by Dr. King is based on how people handle oppression during segregation where it was the way of life in the south. According to him, there is a whole spectrum that ranges from violence to non-violence action in which the views are placed and illustrated strategically how oppressed people deal with the oppression, which are acquiescence, violence, and non-violence resistance (King, 2010).

Acquiescence is a form of dealing with oppression. People surrender to oppression and become accustomed to it as a way of living. Creating an atmosphere where the oppressed person learns to live in with oppression and never fully understands what self-respect is. Violence, as a method of dealing with oppression is the way that people who resort to violence also influence hatred at the same time and will only result in temporary results. Although at times it may be seen as the best way out but no one should ever degrade themselves to that level of understanding and standard. People who use non-violent resistance as a form of dealing with oppression take in characteristics from both acquiescence and violence oppression. Non-violent resistance agrees with the person who acquiesces that one should not be physically aggressive towards his opponent, but balances the equation by agreeing with the person of violence that evil must be resisted.

F. The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman

The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman is a 1974 American television film based on the novel of the same name by Ernest J. Gaines. The film was broadcasted on CBS. The film was directed by John Korty; the screenplay was written by Tracy Keenan Wynn and executive produced by Roger Gimbel. It starred Cicely Tyson in the lead role, as well as Michael Murphy, Richard Dysart, Katherine Helmond and Odetta. The film was shot in Baton Rouge, Louisiana and was notable for its use of very realistic special effects makeup by Stan Winston and Rick Baker for the lead character that was shown from the age of 23 to 110. The film is distributed through Classic Media (IMDb).

In the film, the atmosphere of slavery and segregation is well preserved. Certain group of people were being marginalized and exploited due to their skin color and ancestors of being the slave of majority. The main character, Jane, recalls her experiences as a slave during the Civil War exactly one year before the Emancipation Proclamation, her failure to gain freedom in Ohio, the years she spent as a laborer, her brief joy as the wife of black cowboy Joe Pittman, her grief over the murder of Ned whom he had considered a child while trying to build a school for black people, and her mixed feelings about black activism in the civil rights movement.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study conducted by using qualitative approach by (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2014). It is a research methodology that usually comes in a form of words. The aim of qualitative approach is to establish theories for social phenomena. That is, it helps to assist us in comprehending our social environment and why things are the way they are. This study focused in the type of oppression received by the character and the way they resisted to it in *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman* movie.

The source of the data will be the entirety of movie itself. The script will be transcribed from the subtitles of the film. The data which is the language features that are in the form of sentences and utterances will be collected straight from the whole script including monologues, dialogues, and narrations uttered by all characters that has the element of oppression or resistance.

Data collecting process will be carried out by firstly understanding the plot of the movie by watching it once and one more time with frequent pauses to really understand the script and checking for script errors. Next step will be taking the raw data. The script will be rewritten in the new Microsoft Office Word document and the identification of words containing the elements of Oppression and Resistance Lastly, the researcher will put all identified words into separated tables of oppression and resistance to ease the analysis.

Data were analyzed by using three following steps: (1) Data condensation which is done by selecting the data from the script that contain the element of oppression or resistance, (2) Data displaying, which is done by displaying gathered and identified data in the form of a table, and (3) Drawing and verifying conclusion, this step will provide the conclusion taken from analyzing the whole data collected after condensing and displaying it.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

According to the film script, all the data collected included types of oppression and resistance. There are 30 statements that indicate the act of oppression along with 14 utterances indicating the resistance in *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman Movie* specified into four types of oppression which are exploitation, marginalization, powerlessness, and violence, and three types of resistance which are acquiescence, violence resistance, and non-violence resistance.

Table I.
Types of Oppression

No.	Types of Oppression	Frequency	Percentage
1	Exploitation	2	6.7%
2	Marginalization	10	33.3%
3	Powerlessness	6	20%
4	Cultural Imperialism	-	-
5	Violence	12	40%
Total		30	100%

According to the data, the characters in *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman* suffered four of it except cultural imperialism. Below are some of the data:

1. Exploitation

Datum 1.

Man : I understand you were a slave.

Jane : **Lots of peoples were slaves.**

The dialogues above were taken in the moment where a journalist wanted to make an interview with Jane Pittman (the main character). The journalist wanted to make a documentary about what happened to slavery in America. Jane stated that during her lifetime, there were so many slaves, asserted the point that not only her but many others. The word “**slave**” defined itself perfectly as the proof of exploitation as slavery is the act of using peoples’ labor with less or even no compensation at

all (Young, 1990). The sentence above doesn't show the act of exploitation directly but explained how the situation went on back then when she was still a slave and hasn't got her freedom yet.

Datum 2.

Ned : ...Remember that we are one, that our cause is one, and that we must help one another if we would succeed. **We have drunk to the drags the bitter cup of, of slavery. We have worn a heavy yoke.** We have sighed beneath our bonds...

The dialogue above was taken when Ned, one of the characters in the movie tried to stand up against the oppression that all of them had been suffered for so long. He explained how hard it is to be a slave, how hard the work they have done every day for all of their life and how the profit they achieved is not fair from all their service, even far from fulfilling their needs. The word "slavery" already showed the situation of exploitation itself, along with the sentence "worn a heavy yoke". Yoke is the thing used by the slaves back then to help carrying heavy stuffs that they put on their shoulder.

2. Marginalization

Datum 3.

Ned : ...It was ignorance that put us here in the first place. Ignorance, because the big tribes of Africa warred against each other, or **made slaves out of the smaller tribes...**

Ned in the dialogue above was in the middle of giving speech to the black people community in the river banks. He told the audiences that it is not skin but the person. It is not the sin of the white that all black Americans become slaves but the big tribes in Africa, their own ancestors. The sentence "made slaves out of the smaller tribes" indicates the situation in the past that started the whole culture of slavery and exploitation of humankind. Instead of exploitation, this sentence refers to the act of marginalization. The consequences of limiting the freedom of the minorities resulted of the loss of their rights and the majorities taking advantages of them.

Datum 4.

Jane : What's important?

Albert : They talk to me about your boy there, Jane. **They don't want him build that school there,** no? They say he could just stir up trouble for niggers. **They want him go back, back where he come from.**

Above is a dialogue between Jane and Albert, one of the white American that was told to kill Jane's son, Ned. In the scene, Albert told Jane about how the white society didn't like Ned that build a

school to give the black society the knowledge they needed as a part of their rights where a person can have the opportunity to learn as every other person. The sentence “**They want him go back, back where he come from**” means that the ruling class were limiting the oppressed black Americans’ right and excluded them from their own rights.

Datum 5.

Quintin : Look, I know this space shot is a big thing, but this woman is well, she's not exactly another human interest story.

Man : Look, Quintin. I'm sure she's fascinating, but **a magazine this size can't survive on a story about an old woman.**

The dialogue above is the pure act of marginalization. The sentence “**a magazine this size can't survive on a story about an old woman**” is a clear example of exclusion of certain individual or group. The phrase “**old woman**” that is referred to Jane is one of the types of population (elderly people) that usually underwent the act of oppression, not only marginalization. The scene itself is when a man named Quintin, the one who interviewed Jane was told to stop his work on Jane’s story because it is not fascinating enough.

3. Powerlessness

Datum 6.

Jimmy : So we can march down to the courthouse.

Jane : Oh Jimmy, Jimmy, Jimmy, you see, **these folks around here ain't ready for nuttin' like that yet.**

The powerless is known for their inability to defend themselves from anything that they faced. Above expressed how the powerless acted to the oppression they faced. Jimmy in the dialogue above was planning a march to the courthouse in order to gain their rights but Jane said how people in their community were not ready yet to do such thing. The people didn’t want to seek power and fight for themselves. The sentence “**these folks around here ain't ready for nuttin' like that yet**” expresses how the black folks staying under the oppression and didn’t do anything to help the to get out of the pressure.

Datum 7.

Ned : I can't leave these people. **They haven't got anybody else who will fight for them,** except the committee.

Above is a dialogue taken in a scene where Jane told Ned to leave their place because of the death threat the white folks planned because he has been leading the black people to start a resistance

act against the segregation law by founding a committee of black people rights. Ned's statement **"They haven't got anybody else who will fight for them"** referred to the black community showed that they are becoming so powerless that they relied on someone to fight for them. The committee acted as their representation because they cannot defend themselves.

Datum 8.

Jimmy : I was with him when he was winning the battle in Alabama and Mississippi, but you people here, my own folks, **haven't even begun to fight.**

How Jimmy in this dialogue persuaded his people to fight back was not a successful one. He went to the church to get the mass' attention and participation to resist the oppression. He said he had won battles against the discrimination and wanted to do the same for his families. The clause **"haven't even begun to fight"** implied how the mass didn't act to get their freedom. They stayed oppressed and lost their will to fight and gain their rights.

4. Cultural Imperialism

Despite the setting in the movie where the black society felt suppressed by the segregation, it is unbelievable that cultural imperialism cannot be found in the movie. The focus of the movie is based on straight oppression of physical and verbal to the oppressed. The topic of culture difference in the movie is rarely spoken or shown in the entire movie, thus data on cultural imperialism are none to be found.

5. Violence

Datum 9.

Jimmy : We want Gidry to arrest her. If one of us did it, **we'd just get beat up.**

Jane : Now, what you want old fat Gidry to arrest her for?

Dialogue above was taken from a scene where Jimmy, one of the black people who planned a resistance against the oppression of the white Americans told her about the plan. He planned to make one of the white police to arrest a girl instead of the men because the threat will be different between gender. The clause **"we'd just get beat up"** explained the act of violence with the phrase **"beat up"** which can be interpreted as a physical abuse intended to certain people.

Datum 10.

Jane : We walked for days through the swamps, staying off the main roads cause them padaroes would **kill a free man** quick as he would a runaway slave. No one knew where we was headed, so, Big Laura, tough as any man, showed the way.

In the movie, the war between Spanish and American or known as the Cuban war made the situation where free man has no safety and Jane in the dialogue explained it with the clause “**kill a free man**”. The word “**kill**” explained the act of violence in the extreme way where the physical abuse made someone loses the life.

Datum 11.

Man : Those folks ain't you're problem.

Old Jane : Yes they are. The other day, they throwed a girl in jail for trying to drink from the fountain.

Today **they killed my Jimmy** and I say I'm going.

Dialogue above was taken in the scene where Jane finally realized that the act of resistance must be taken since the oppression have gone too far. The oppressed have thrown a girl from her side to a jail and took a life out of her loved one. The act of oppression again ended in extreme way where somebody lost life.

Table II.
Types of Resistance

No.	Types of Resistance	Frequency	Percentage
1	Acquiescence	5	31.25%
2	Violence Resistance	4	25%
3	Non-Violence Resistance	7	43.75%
Total		16	100%

According to the data, the characters in *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman* resisted using all three types of the resistance. Below are some of the data:

1. Acquiescence

Datum 1.

Jimmy : So we can march down to the courthouse.

Jane : Oh Jimmy, Jimmy, Jimmy, you see, **these folks around here ain't ready for nuttin' like that yet.**

Jane in the dialogue above told Jimmy that she and the people of oppressed or the black society were not ready to fight for themselves. Jimmy made a plan to march down the courthouse where the bureaucracy headquarter is. Jane stated **“these folks around here ain't ready for nuttin' like that yet”**, showing how submissive they are. They accepted their fate of oppressed and don't want to reach for freedom.

Datum 2.

Man 2 : Honest wage for an honest day's work.

Unc : You don't know nothing about outside. **You belong right here on this plantation.**

Above is the example of acquiescence, proven by the sentence **“You belong right here on this plantation”**. The sentence was taken from the dialogue where Jane and her people in the plantation got a freedom since the government in that time said that every slaves can get their freedom and live as any other free men. Many slaves said they wanted to get their freedom out of the plantation they worked but one of them called Unc (abbreviation for uncle) said they cannot live out of the plantation as they only live for the plantation and will not be able to survive outside.

Datum 3.

Ned : ...Do you know what a nigger is? First, **a nigger feels below anything else on this Earth. He doesn't care about himself. He doesn't care about anybody else. He doesn't care about anything...**

The sentences from the dialogue above have deep meaning. Above Ned, one of the character said that *Negro* and *Black American* are different. He said that how *Negro* acted are wrong as they neglected themselves and stop caring for their own right. They stopped fighting to get their freedom and being submissive.

2. Violence Resistance

Datum 4.

Joe : But after a time, there were too many and no jobs, and people started freezin' to death of cold. Others got starvin'. **Then the protests, riots came**, and people started going off to other states...

This dialogue above explained the cause of all demonstration that occurred during the segregation. There are too many people that don't have home or job to fulfill their needs, resulted in

riots and protest. They ended up panicking and used their strength to fight physically and fell to the violent way. The result didn't show up and they finally left for another place.

Datum 5.

Woman : Miss Jane, the newspaper in Washington say that the Rough Riders would never made up Sandmond Hill, if it hadn't been for the **black soldiers fightin'** beside 'em.

At the time when Ned came back with his wife and kid, he had gone through many fights. He gathered many people and named themselves as Rough Riders and they fight for the prosperity of the black people. They fight with the help of other black soldiers and won many wars. The battle and resistance is a success but showed that it doesn't solve the problem since they had suffered from not only a single fight, but many, proving a single battle doesn't finish anything and doing the violent is not the best solution.

Datum 6.

Jimmy : Well, **some people are thinking of carrying guns**, but we don't want anything to do with that nonsense. Others want to carry flags. Well, what's a flag if you haven't got any meaning behind it?

This dialogue above described Jimmy's good intention of not falling for the violence. He explained that doing the violence has no meaning at all. This part however focused on the sentence "**some people are thinking of carrying guns**" where the word **guns** can be meant as people fighting in a war to achieve freedom.

3. Non-Violence Resistance

Datum 7.

Jimmy : **That girl is gonna drink from the fountain** tomorrow, Miss Jane.

Jane : Well,

During the time of segregation, the white society marginalized the black society from the rest of the world. They made a drinking fountain only for them and limiting the black so they will never be able to drink from it. Jimmy in the dialogue above said that he will made a girl "**drink from the fountain**" as the resistance against the discriminating law. He did not use the violence or physical aggression but using the act that showed how they don't agree to the law and seek for the respect and equality.

Datum 8.

Old Jane : ...For a while, yes, it looked like things were gonna be alright for us. **We had a little school** on the place where we could go at night...

The act of non-violence resistant doesn't always about the act straight against the matter, but the act to establish the better quality of the society by giving knowledge to support all their act against the oppression. Some of the characters in the movie realized it and they made school to teach their young generations to be able to stand for themselves. The act doesn't consist any physical aggression nor abusing any person which can be categorized as the act of non-violence.

Datum 9.

Old Jane : ...You know, he found out about **committees being formed** that helped the coloreds with their rights, and **so he formed one too.**

The dialogue above showed the resistance that the colored had done in order to defend themselves and achieve their freedom. The implementation of "**committees**" that helped the people of colors persuaded Ned to made their own committees to help the people around them. This committees are using their word to help against problems that keeping them from being fully human and had succeeded their job.

CONCLUSION

There are 4 types of oppression that are used by the character in the movie *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman*, namely: (1) Exploitation with 3 data, (2) Marginalization with 9 data, (3) Powerlessness with 6 data, and (4) Violence with 12. What's the most dominant shows the quality of the research, meaning violence types of oppression being the most dominant in the movie. The characters in the movie that underwent the oppression resisted using three types of resistance, namely (1) acquiescence where the characters accepted the oppression and live along with it, (2) Violence Resistance where the characters fight for their rights using physical aggression, and (3) Non-Violence Resistance where the characters uses their knowledge to build schools and formed a committee to help them express their voice.

SUGGESTIONS

Contributed to other researcher, the topic of oppression and resistance can be considered fresh because the fact that there are cases happened even until these days and always become a big problem to the whole community making this a vital topic and it is best to keep studying on to build better

understanding of the cases. The act of oppression should not be let in the reality. In the field of psychology, those who experienced oppression must fight it with their knowledge and not become aggressive to it because there is always a way to get out from the cycle of oppression while the ruler or the majorities should understand the clear act of oppression and beware that the act may affect badly to the minorities. The possibility of oppression to happen in the future is never zero and thus understanding the topic will press the possibility to minimum and keep peace between all races, no matter how high or low someone's class in society.

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