STEREOTYPING AFRICAN AMERICANS' RACIAL IDENTITY ON VALERIE MARTIN'S *PROPERTY*

Rasiah

Faculty of Cultural science Halu Oleo University, Kendari

rasiahsitti@gmail.com

Abstract

This study is intended to analyze the persistence of African American stereotype in the contemporary slavery-themed novel authored by Valerie Martin, *Property* (2003). Valerie Martin is a white author, who seems to have changed the slavery discourse, but the stereotyping of African Americans is still there and built in a new form of stereotyping. Postcolonial analysis showed that the stereotyping of African Americans as 'other' existed in direct stereotyping and indirect stereotyping. Direct stereotyping is that the author directly uses the pejorative language and symbols in forming the African American character, meanwhile indirect stereotyping is the author using the shift of discourse that seemed worthy in describing the African American character, but in the same time it affirms the stereotype of the African American identity as inferior still exists, even in the so-called Post-racial era in the United States.

Keywords: Representation, Stereotyping, Identity, Race, African American

Introduction

Simmels (Smith, 1980) defined the stereotyping as a process of putting people or objects into categories and judgments based on specific traits. There are two sides in stereotyping individuals or groups; a giver of stereotypes (assessing) and the one given the stereotype (assessed), resulting practically in a group distinction between "us" and "them." "We", here, refers to a dominant group and they consider themselves as the superior ones, besides "they" refers to 'other' who are outside of the dominant group (out group) or vice versa. The basis of such different categorization is a character or specific traits, for example; color, behavior, customs act, gender, and ethnicity to a particular group of people (Liliweri, 2005, p. 208). The formation of stereotypes based on race was originally known as the concept of biological differentiation, then turned into a social construction to legitimize superiority of certain races.

In defining "difference" and "the Other," Stuart Hall underlines two things. First is the question of the distinction and otherness has an important role in the elucidation. Both differences were ambivalent, can be positive and negative. Both of these are important for the production of meaning, the formation of the language and culture for social identity and nature of the self as a distinct subject, and, at the same time, it is also a threat, dangerous, negative prejudice, cleavage, and aggression against "The Other." What should be remembered is that the ambivalence of the character of "difference," particularly on the legality of the division, in fact, could lead to imperialism and racism towards those who are considered different (Hall, 1997, p. 224).

In the African American case, the basis of the formation of stereotypes is that then has implications for the labeling of the overall attributes of the black race. African Americans are a group of immigrants in

the United States from Africa. Africa is a continent that often connoted black (black earth) and the black man (Thomas, 2002, p 145). 'Black' later became a marker of physical identity for the African Americans whose significance continued to be constructed. The identity of "black" then became the basis for the formation of stereotypes as well as prejudice and discrimination in the United States. Black is contrasted with White and this has built an association that refers to the unequal racial segregation, in which the White man is idealized as the standard of human superiority, while Black is the opposite of it.

The problematic case appeared in *Property* (2003) in which an African American woman is a household slave in the home of a White family and is described as beautiful, with the appearance of light-skin, a slight build, and excellent posture. It contrasts to the image of black women described in historical sources, as well as in the representation of the past eras fictions. In the previous fictional representations, the image of black women as servants in white homes was identical with the figure of Mammy-fat, black, big, and unattractive.

At first glance the novels showed that there was a tendency for the author to change the old image of African Americans as the ugly people, but the changing of image did not reflect the change of attitude towards the black identity, it just reinforced and strengthened the superiority of whites. African American women could be defined as beautiful when they appeared similar to white women in relation to skin and posture. Regarding this fact, Said (1978, p. X) stated that there are efforts to establish the "legitimacy" of the superiority of the colonizers (white) to the inferiority of the colonized culture (black). He warned that the cultural hegemony as an endless practice continues in colonial discourse. As part of the colonial

discourse; race, ethnicity, or social class in a community of people who have been colonized in the institution of slavery, African Americans, have a tendency to always be marginalized, isolated, read, and controlled by imperialist invaders and colonial descendants, even though the era of slavery and segregation has ended. Ashcroft, Grifith, and Tiffin (2003, p. 2) stated that a postcolonial community that is characterized by liberation or independence movement can still become a subject of the dominance of neo-colonialism subtly or overtly, and independence has not solved this problem totally. The Growth of the new elite in an independent community is often supported by neo-colonial institutions, by developing of internal division based on discrimination of race, language, and religion and the sustainability of unequal treatment of the community (indigenous/minority) in the community that is occupied or controlled. Thus, it could then be explained that the post-colonial is an ongoing process of resistance and reconstruction.

Methodology

Based upon such description, this study then used the theory of postcolonial proposed by Edward Said (1978) as a means of analysis. The concept of Orientalism on how Western constructed East is used to know how the White Author constructs Black characters in the contemporary slavery-themed novel, *Property*. Just like Western colonialism in the East, the "internal colonialism" in the enslavement of African Americans in the United States since the year of 1619, has raised the long lasting problem, even in the aftermath of the Human Rights movement, especially in the construction of its identity. As a subject who experienced slavery in the era of antebellum, the construction of African American's identity must be continually investigated. George Lipsitz (Rowe, 2000, p. 9) argued

that the use of postcolonial studies in American Studies is important to examine the discourse of marginalization and nationalist resistance movements, for example, the Black Power movement in the model of "internal colonization" as a transnational political alliances. Lipsitz (Rowe, 2000, p. 9) urged people to continue to scrutinize the active awareness of the legacy of "internal colonialism." So, the use of postcolonial framework in this study is important to use in tracing the legacy of racism in fiction, particularly in works written by White authors. The inquiry of the stereotyping of African Americans in contemporary slavery-themed fiction could give a comprehensive understanding about the features of United States as multicultural states.

Discussion

The analysis shows that the attached image of Black characters still refers to the white standards. It can be seen in the construction of physical appearances, intellectuality, and tempermentality in this novel. The summary of the finding is displayed on the following table.

The images that constructing the stereotypes of African Americans

White	Black	Stereotyping
Beautiful	Ugly	Physical
Smart, Intelligent	Illiterate, uneducated class	Intellectual
Civilized	Uncivilized	Temperamental

Based on the binary opposition analysis, there are three aspects that are used to construct the stereotypes of African American identity in this novel; physical, intellectual, and temperamental appearances. Each of them will be explained in subtopics below.

Physical Stereotyping

In White (colonizer) discourse, the ideal image of beauty refers to the criteria of White people; white skin, blond hair, blue-eyes, and slim or slender-bodied (Thompson, 2006, p. 44; Hall, 1995, pp. 249-257). It is become the standard and preferred of ideal beauty. African American women and men in Western society may find themselves idealized to the standard of beauty or compared to White as the symbol of ideal beauty and what is viewed as attractive and desirable. The doctrine of the beautiful woman as synonymous with blond hair, blue eyes, and Caucasian features has been implanted to hegemonize American thought for hundreds of years.

There are two implied symbols that are used in *Property* to define the black appearances. The first is by using the direct symbols that referred to the stereotype of African Americans and the second is by indirect symbols. The direct symbols can be seen in the use of pejorative language and animal symbols, like dog, monkey, bug eyes, and nappy hair, as labels used for the low creature. Here, the African American characters are pictured as ugly people, as expressed in the following excerpt,

I had Sarah in my room all morning with the baby she calls Nell, a dark, ugly thing, but quiet enough. He hates the sight of this one. It's too dark to be his, or so he thinks, though stranger have happened, and everyone knows a drop of negroe blood does sometimes overflow like inkpot in the child of parents who are passing for white, to the horror of the couple and their children as well. (Martin, 2003, p. 6)

The way and attitude of white female leading character in describing the black

character, Neal, in the above excerpt is a reflection of the formation of Black stereotypes as ugly, bad, and low in the white people's minds. Neal, an African American child, actually got hybrid blood from the white father and black mother, but he is considered has degraded the white genes of his white father. As indicated by Neal & Wilson (1989) that, "the mixing blood of Negro and White in racism ideology viewed degrading whites genes, not only in the context of biologically, but sociologically either" (as cited in Wulandari, 2014, p. 99). This is why mulattoes, in the past eras, were not accepted or acknowledged in the white community.

The second illustration of the stereotyping of African Americans' physical appearance can be seen in the shift of Black female appearances representation. *Property* (2003) explicitly represented the perfectness of the black female appearances through Sarah. It is expressed in the following excerpt.

> "This is Bam," my husband said. I nodded, turning to Sarah. I knew who she was, that she was my aunt's wedding gift. Her appearance was pleasing, tall, slender, light-skinned, neatly dressed, excellent posture. Her hands were folded over her apron. She acknowledged me with something between a bow and a cursty, but she wasn't looking at me at all. She was looking past me, with an expression of sullen expectation, my husband (Martin, 2003 p. 20).

The concern of the characterization of the Black female in the above excerpt is actually not addressed to the shift in its representation, but in the ideology of the shift. The illustration of the shift is still in the cycle of the White image, that is a Black female is considered beautiful when her appearance is similar to Whites'; light skinned, neatly dressed, tall, and slender. This means that, the character of Black female who is described as fat and black skinned is still kept considered ugly. As Neal & Wilson (1989) stated that, "*light-skinned* appearances marked the mixed blood of Caucasian genes in Negro blood, that also could effect the appearances of Black descendants" (p. 323). It is clearly shown that the White author uses the spectacle of white colonialism in creating the new appearance of African American women in her novels. However the definition of beauty continues to refer to the White standard. It deals with Babha's (1994) concept, called *fixity*, which is that "the colonizer strengthens the colonial discourse by emphasizing and proclaiming the excellent features of their own identity and culture repeatedly" (p. 82). This strategy determines the other as it is visualizing the colonial power. They are similar with the dominant white character, similar in physical appearances, as if they are the same.

Intellectual Stereotyping

In much of the literature about, African Americans from the antebellum period are imaged as "*beasts*". *Beast* is a symbol of an animal, which marks two things in African American characters; those are, the sosial class as well as the quality of self. One of the qualities refers to the intellectuality aspect; that is, African Americans are represented as an illiterate and uneducated race. The image of beast is then strengthened through the persuasion of science in the nineteenth century in Darwin's theory *On the Origin of Species* (1859) (Mellinger, 1992, p. 416; Frederickson, 1987, p.159). In the subchapter of *The Preservation of Favoured Races in the Struggle for Life,* Darwin captured the human intellectuality of the era. Aryan Whites' affirmed themselves as superior intellectually factor among the human races. The Black was

considered as a distinct species and merely a degraded version of the human species that had a low intellectual ability. Mellinger (1992) observed that this view was sustained in popular consciousness up to the early twentieth century. He traces the stereotyping of African Americans through discussion of the fact that the African descendants continued to be illustrated as a degraded human species through popular post cards in the twentieth century. The broken English they spoke, their facial features, and specific behavior legitimated the stereotype of the low intellectuality of African Americans.

In *Property* (2003) the stereotyping of African Americans' intellectuality can be seen in the use of pejorative language, such as watermelon head, the description of face and jaw, as well as the absence of education symbols, their way of thinking, their attitude, and language use.

The author uses the following model for characters in the novel: "*watermelon*, face and jaw marked the unbrainned men, as well as their confused expressions, *simplemindness*, and *strangeness* (Mellinger, 1992, p. 424). These characterizations presented through Sarah, Delphie, Walker, and Cook on *Property* (2003). They are not only described uneducated, but also cannot think rationally, and seem backward. They live dependent on whites. This novel states that African Americans cannot stand living in the occident condition without Whites, they are just fulfilled by living as slaves in the household and on the plantation because they just have physical power, not an intellectual sphere.

> My Husband murdered...I hardly knew whether to laugh or cry. It was as if i had been in a foreign country, a land where madness was rule, and returned to find nothing changed but my own understanding. I glance at Delpine,

she looked dismayed, though her features were composed in an approximation of servility. She's worried about what will happen to her now, i thought. We all are. Every minute of every hour. Mr O'Maley stood waiting for my response. He was worried i might have gone mad and he would have to deal with it "I know it," I said calmly, to his obvious relief, "I was there." (Martin, 2003, p. 122).

Another aspect to represent the lower intellectuality of African Americans in the novel is through the language use. The mixed pattern of Gullah dialect and English is considered to be broken English and it is viewed as a mirror African Americans' intellectual quality. The language use of African Americans' character can be seen in the following excerpt,

> "Is this one yours, Missy?" The Captain asked me.

> "He a little yellow monkey," the wounded man said.

> "He don want no bread, "the wonded man observed.

> "What his name? The ca[ptain asked to me

> "Walter" I said

> "Tell him to stop that noise," he said. I Shrugged.

> " He don hear, Sarah said.

> "Where is this devil done clipped my Crow? The Captain asked (Martin, 2003, p. 110).

The word 'Missy' instead of 'Mistress' in the above excerpt shows the uniqueness of African American English (AAE) usage, but it is considered to be Broken English in the white people perspectives. We can see that some words like gerunds or present continuous predicate are missing letters at the end. For example, the word walking was written without the 'g', and became walkin', don't became don', even in the stances expose more words like "sur" instead of sir, mah for my, lak for lack, huah for who, mo' for more. Some words from African American English actually have enriched the glossary of English vocabulary, for example, we can see the words like dunno and outta, actually come from AAE words.

However, the appearance of Gullah English in this novel is not used to be unique, although it is indeed unique, but it is to show the class of African American intellectuality. The English Gullah used in this novel is expressed through the African Americans character in the plantation and household as well as among the runaways. It is different from the mulatto man's mode of speaking, Mr. Roget, who speaks the English standard's, described as gentle, intellectual, and talented. It means that the stereotype is that Gullah English is used by an uneducated and illiterate class of people. It also indicates that the way Gullah English is viewed can put it off from the consciousness of its native speaker as a cultural identity.

Stereotyping of Temperamental

In the discourse of slavery, the issue that was spread out by the racists and slavery supporters when dealing with the emancipation of African American slaves was the temperament of slaves. Two kinds of stereotyping that dealt with mentality were docile and amiable when enslaved, and, ferocious and murderous when freed (Frederickson, 1987, p. 57). One

implication of these opinions was the raising of the image of African Americans as uncivilized and backward people that affected their way of living. Their way of life and style in Africa when discussed in America dealt with their wild behavior and attitude in society. This kind of behavior was considered negative, and was a warning to not emancipate them; first, because, they could not be productive without whites' guidance and surveillance; second, there was a concern that they could create a dangerous environment for the community, especially for the white community. Mellinger (1992) inclined that "African American is viewed as lacking in emotional control and moral constraint, domestic violence, drinking, references to cannibalism, gambling, servitude to Whites, as well as references to sexual libertinism and references to flatulence" (p 425).

The representation of black (tempera) mentality in *Property* (2003) mostly can be seen in description of the runways behavior, and some household slaves also caused problems in the white family. It is as reflected in the following excerpt,

> They just want to murder as many of us as they can," he said. "They don't think further than that." In New Orleans, i had heard of an American lady who discovered her maid attempting to poison the entire household by lacing the sugar with arsenic. What benefit would her mistress's demise be to her, since she would only be sold again, perhaps to a more severe mistress? It puzzled me. "I suppose it is just the numbers," I said (Martin, 2003, p. 101).

The stereotyping of African Americans as a source of criminality still exists in this novel. It is described as a product of uncivilized and backward society that had been embedded in African American since

they were in Africa. Every kind of evil resulted without thinking about what made it exist, and the White people directly judged the African Americans' uncivilized character as the product of the savagery brought from Africa. This prejudice then brought unequal treatment in court of justice even no need for justice. This criminal behavior is represented in the characters of bad Buck and Jazebel in American fiction and popular culture (Bogle, 1971; Worsley, 2011). This stereotyping existed when the clash occurred either in the North or in the South. In this case, when the clash occurred and white people died, black people were blamed as the murderers of the white. Based on this allegation, Black people were stereotyped as murders, and this was embedded in the image of African Americans for a long time. It also can be seen in the White films; *Birth of the Nation* (1915) and *The Green Mile* (1999). The role of Black characters in those novels shape the stereotype of *Buck* that according to Bogle (1973, p. 10) is characterized as big, strong, violent, prone to betrayal, over sexed, and wild. Even, *The Birth of The Nation* successfully raised a White mob's hatred and anger and caused them to attack African Americans without reason in that era.

Dealing with such description, Nachbar & Lause (1992) stated that:

> Stereotypes are "standardized conception of image of a specific group of people or objects" and that this standardized conception is "held in common by the members of a group […] Popular stereotypes are images which are shared by those who hold a common cultural mindset – they are the way a culture, or significant sub-group within that culture, defines and labels a specific group of people" which are the "direct expressions of

beliefs and values"..... Stereotyping in society functions to categorize, as it is "[…] create classifications of individuals (pp. 236- 238).

From this excerpt, we can point out that such stereotyping of African Americans in *Property* (2003) comes from the values that exist in society. The recent American mainstream kept categorizing people based on common cultural mindset, even when it entered the post-racial era. Dealing with the idea that literary works are a reflection of the society, the content of the novel would mostly reflect the same values in society. The main objective besides meeting audience interests is also to legitimate the dominant class in the society. This is why the author of fictions will go to great lengths to mold their fiction to reflect the audience beliefs and values. It is also pointed out that the legacy of slavery still exists in contemporary fictional, though it is modified to represent a more gentle mode of expression. As Alberth Memi (Bonnila-Silva, 2006) stated, "there is a strange kind of enigma associated with the problem of racism. No one, or almost no one, wishes to see themselves as racist; still, racism persists, real and tenacious" (p. 1).

Conclusion

This study concluded that *Property* (2003) is considered to have changed the mode of slavery discourse, specifically related to the fact that the author tried to represent the image of African American's in a better light. However, the perfectness shown in the representation of Black characters affirmed that the standard of human superiority is still the White character. The author smartly combined the story of slavery by fusing it with the historical context and modern context based on the eyes of White authors. This novel represents the worship of black characters, but at the same time, they are also ignored

and marginalized. In fact, the stereotyping of African Americans as the 'other' in contemporary white novels still persists, representing them as negative and inferior.

References

Bonilla-Silva, E. (2006). *Racism without Racists: Color-Blind Racism and the Persistence of Racial Inequality in the United States (2nd Ed).* USA: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc.

Ackerman, A. (2012). Cultural Hybridity: between Metaphor and Empiricism. Dalam P. S. Wolfgang, *Conceptualizing Cultural Hybridization: A transdiciplinary Approach.* Heiderberg: Springer web.

Aschroft, G. &. (2003). *The Post-colonial: Studies Reader.* London & New York: Routledge .

Babha, H. (1994). *The Location of Culture.* London & New York: Routledge.

Bogle, D. (1973). *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, and Buck: an Interpretative history of Black in American Films.* New York: MacMillan.

Frederickson, G. (1971). *The Black Image in the white Mind: the Debate on Afro-American Character & Destiny, 1817-1914.* USA: Wesleyan University Press.

Hall, S. (1997). "the Speactale of the 'Other'". Dalam S. Hall, *Representation: Cultural Representation and Signifying Practices* (hal. 225-285). London, California, New Delhi: SAGE Publications Ltd.

Liliweri, A. (2005). *Prasangka dan Konflik: Komunikasi Lintas Budaya Masyarakat Multikultur .* Yogyakarta: LKIS.

Martin, V. (2003). *Property.* New York : Vintage Books.

Mellinger, W. M. (1992). Postcards from the Edge of the Color Line: Images of African Americans in Popular Culture, 1893–1917. *Symbolic Interaction, 15*(4), 413-433.

Nacbar & Lause. (1972). *Popular Culture: An Introductory Text.* Bowling Green: Bowling Green State University popular Press.

Neal, A., and M. L. Wilson. (1989). The Role of Skin Color and Features in the Black Community: Implications for Black Women and Therapy. *Clinical Psychology Review, 9*, 323-333.

Rowe, J. 2. (2000). "Post-Nationalism, Globalism, and New American studies". Dalam J. Rowe, *Post-nationalist American Studies.* California : University of California Press.

Rowe, J. (2012). *The Cultural Politics of the New American studies.* USA: Open Humanities Press .

Said, E. (1978). *Orientalisme: Menggungat Hegemoni Barat dan Mendudukan Timur sebagai Subjek (Terj. Ahmad Fawaid) .* New York : Vintage Books.

Smith, E. (1980). "An Analysis of The Social Stereotype with Special Reference to Afro-Americans" . *Humboldt Journal of Social Relations, 8*(1), 61-82.

Thomas, B. W. (2002). Struggling With the Past: Some Views of African-American Identity. *International Journal of Historical Archaeology, 6*(2), 143-151.

Thompson, V. S. (2006). African American Body Image: identity and Physical self-Acceptance. *Humbolt Journal of Social relation, 30*(2), 44-67.

Worsley, S. M. (2010). *Audience, Agency, and Identity In Black Popular Culture.* New York : Routledge.

Wulandari, R. (2014). Hibridity and Formation of Cultural Identity in Jhumpa Lahiri's Fictions. *1st ASSINDO International Conference and Congress: American Studies and Cultural*

Hybridity (hal. 98-107). Yogyakarta: ASSAA.