

# Mapping discrimination against Black Americans in Kim Johnson's *This is My America*

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## Abstract

Racial discrimination is still a conspicuous issue in literature, as in Kim Johnson's *This is My America* (2020). This study aims to scrutinize the racism issues in the novel. The Beaumont family experiences racial prejudice: Mr. Beaumont, the father, is incarcerated due to the accusation of killing a white couple; Tracy, the daughter, is assaulted at school due to the father's prosecution; and Jamal, the son, is convicted of killing a white girl due to the father's history. This study employs a close reading methodology (Ohrvik, 2024) to gain a comprehensive interpretation of the narrative. Moreover, this study utilizes Alport's prejudice scheme (1954) and Pincus' discrimination frame (2000) to discuss the story's conflict in-depth. The discussion shows that *This is My America* portrays three types of discrimination: individual, institutional, and structural. The discriminatory acts in the forms of unjust laws, social exclusion, and physical attacks are enforced by the belief in white supremacy.

**Keywords:** *discrimination, prejudice, racism, This is My America, white supremacy*

## Introduction

For some reason, it is sometimes challenging to accept differences even though we live in multicultural communities. Classifying people into "the self" and "the other" often results in giving discriminatory treatment. At some point, discrimination not only situates others into disadvantaged positions but also puts their lives in danger. Discrimination is still one of the crucial issues exhibited in English literature. Racial discrimination has been a central conflict in novels mimicking the social issue of living in the United States. The novels *To Kill a Mocking Bird* by Harper Lee (1960), *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* by Mohsin Hamid (2007), *Americanah* by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (2013), *God Help the Child* by Toni Morrison (Morrison, 2015), *Hidden Figures* by Margot Lee Shetterly (2016), *American Street* by Ibi Aanu Zobi (2017), and *The Hate U Give* by Angie Thomas (2017) are some examples of how racism issues: stereotype, prejudice, and discrimination reflect American society.

Stereotype is "a specific belief or assumption (thoughts) about individuals based solely on their membership in a group, regardless of their individual characteristics" (Worthy et al., 2025, para. 2). Prejudice is "a negative attitude and feeling toward an individual based solely on one's membership in a particular social group" (Allport, Brown as cited in Worthy et al., 2025, para. 4). Discrimination is "negative action toward an individual as a result of one's membership in a particular group" (Allport, Dovidio & Gaertner, as cited in Worthy et al., 2025, para. 6). Stereotype, prejudice, and discrimination are interrelated. Discussing literary works that portray racism issues: stereotypes, prejudice, and discrimination is crucial as readers' empathy and sympathy are built through the experience of the fictional characters (Cakrawati et al., 2023). The

discourse of racism issues: acknowledging that systemic racism does exist and transforming people's minds into more tolerant, considerate, and compassionate towards any aspects of differences will create a peaceful community in the long run. Therefore, this study proposes a critical discourse of one example of English literature that illustrates racism issues, specifically in the relationships between white and black Americans in the United States.

Racism is the oppression given to the minority by the majority within the context of racial characteristics (Muthmainnah et al., 2024). Racism involves "systemic inequality, institutional discrimination, internalized stereotypes, and racial attitudes" (Shiao & Woody, 2021, p. 495). Racism in the United States is a system that favors whites and discriminates against blacks in terms of many aspects of life, such as education, the labor market, housing, credit markets, health care, and incarceration (Reskin, 2012). As a system, it is deeply rooted and performed consciously and unconsciously, averting blacks' prosperity. Racism, then, is an act of classifying groups of people into whites and others based on their characteristics, placing them into superior/ inferior positions by discriminating in order to uphold racial dominance (Shiao & Woody, 2021). In this case, racism is the result of white supremacy, the belief that white Americans are superior to others; thus, whites are granted to prioritize whites and oppress blacks for the sake of whites' advantages (Melson-Silimon et al., 2024).

Racial discrimination is giving different treatment, intentionally or automatically, based on the person's racial identity (Reskin, 2012; Muthmainnah et al., 2024). Racial discrimination refers to unfair treatment of individuals or groups based on their race or ethnicity that mainly reflects the bias and prejudice of individuals of a dominant racial group against individuals of minority racial groups (Theodorson et al., 1979; Shiao & Woody, 2021). In this case, racial prejudice includes a set of beliefs, emotional reactions, and motivated behaviors toward people of a certain race (Pincus & Ehrlich, 2018). Five manifestations of prejudice are antilocution, avoidance, discrimination, physical attack, and extermination (Allport, 1954). Racial prejudice, thus, is perilous when acted out as racial discrimination, making certain groups of people suffer negative consequences (Blank et al., 2004), unequal treatment, and unequal outcomes (Clair & Denis, 2015; Melson-Silimon et al., 2024). There are three types of discrimination: individual, institutional, and structural (Pincus, 2000). The wide range of disparities reflects that racism is systemic; it is embedded in laws, policies, practices, beliefs, and attitudes that are performed to sustain white supremacy (Braveman et al., 2022).

Several studies have been done on racial discrimination portrayed in English Literature. First, Saini (2015), in an article entitled "A Critical Study of Harper Lee's Novel *To Kill a Mockingbird*," exposed the story's setting during the Great Depression in Alabama, which historically portrays discrimination towards African Americans. By using Foucault's Power Mechanism Perspective, Saini concluded that racism depicted in the story is a form of white domination, making blacks their subjects of power (2015). Second, Yunitri et al. (2019) discussed the same issue in "Racism in the Novel *The Hate U Give* by Angie Thomas." The article exhibits two kinds of racism portrayed in the story: individual and institutional. The first refers to name-calling, and the second refers to discrimination in public places and police brutality. Third, Febrianti et al. (2019), in "The Struggle of African-American Female Character in Margot Lee Shatterly's Novel *Hidden Figures*," reviewed that African American females experience double oppression, which is racial and gender-based discrimination. By scrutinizing the narrative elements, it is found that race and sex interlap and put the main characters in liability positions.

This study, though discussing the same issues of racial discrimination, posits the three types of discrimination: individual, institutional, and structural, which are interconnected and perpetuated by the belief that whites are superior, so they have the liberty to take advantage of the non-whites. Therefore, the research question of this study is: How is the issue of racial discrimination depicted in *This is My America*? The discussion then refers to the following concepts. First, Pincus (2000) proposed the types of discrimination within a society: individual, institutional, and structural. Individual discrimination refers to individual actions that give unfair treatment to other individuals; institutional discrimination refers to unequal treatment in public facilities; and structural discrimination refers to policies that limit the access of particular groups of people, resulting in unequal outcomes. The three types of discrimination are performed consciously/ unconsciously and intentionally/ unintentionally against people of colors (Pincus & Ehrlich, 2018). Second, within a similar context, Allport (1954) posed five forms of racial prejudice: antilocution, avoidance, discrimination, physical attacks, and extermination. Antilocution refers to talking about a particular race in a derogatory manner. Avoidance refers to excluding an individual or people of a particular race and denying its existence as a part of the community. Discrimination refers to the unfair treatment and limited access of an individual or people of a particular race. Physical attack refers to assaults that are done to hurt an individual or people of a particular race. Extermination refers to killing people of a particular race in an attempt to eliminate their existence. All in all, the two concepts, Pincus' discrimination frame (2000) and Allport's prejudice scheme (1954) are applicable in mapping discrimination against black Americans in Kim Johnson's *This is My America* (2020).

## Method

This study is a literature review that aims to scrutinize racism issues in Kim Johnson's *This is My America* (2020). The data of this study are the essential passages and characters' dialogs from the novel that imply racism issues. The methodology used in this study is close reading methodology (Ohrvik, 2024), which involves reading multiple times to acquire critical understanding. The steps of data collection are: first, reading the novel attentively to examine the narrative elements; second, taking notes of the essential passages that imply racism issues; and third, classifying the data into three kinds of discrimination: individual, institutional, and structural. The data is discussed using Allport's prejudice scheme (1954) and Pincus' discrimination frame (2000).

## Results

Racial discrimination is an act done by individuals of the majority group towards individuals of minority and marginalized groups by treating them differently, which places them in a more inferior position. The novel *This Is My America* (2020) portrays various forms of racial discrimination, including individual, institutional, and structural discrimination. These acts of discrimination are performed due to the pre-existing biases and prejudices of the members of the white community towards blacks as a whole. The actions performed also vary, from mild to extreme violent actions.

## Discussion

The novel *This is My America* by Kim Johnson (2020) presents a young black American girl, Tracy Beaumont, who encounters racism. She and her family experience racism in the forms of prejudice, unjust laws, social exclusion, assault, and media bias.

Her father, Mr. Beaumont, is wrongly prosecuted and on death row for killing a white couple, the Davidsons. He suffers police brutality and court bias. Since the trials, Tracy has been experiencing offensive behaviors on the street, assaulted and excluded at school, and attacked at home. Tracy's brother, Jamal, also faces racial prejudice; he is wrongly accused of a white girl, Angela Herron's murder. With no evidence, he is represented as a black criminal by the media.

### **Individual Discrimination**

Individual discrimination is an act that focuses on the actions and behavior done by a specific individual or group of individuals from a majority group that disadvantages individuals of minority and marginalized groups (Pincus & Ehrlich, 2018). Individual discrimination does not have to be extreme, but it can be seen and felt through the subtle behavior and actions of the majority group's individuals. In *This Is My America* (2020), there are three events of individual discrimination: the first, Tracy experiences racial prejudice on the street; the second, Tracy is assaulted and excluded at the school; and the third, Tracy's house is attacked.

The first event of individual discrimination occurs when Tracy is on her way to Herron Media, a broadcasting station owned by Angela's father.

After school, I walk alone to Herron Media ... I can't help but notice an older white lady pull her purse closer as I walk by her on the sidewalk. Her action sends my mind spiraling on high alert to the people around me. Every time there's a whisper in the ear, a stare in my direction, a flinch from someone passing me ... that let me know my place. Branded as an outsider more than seven years ago, like each member of my family. We don't belong. (Johnson, 2020, p. 36)

The event shows that Tracy is the subject of racial prejudice as the white lady presumes her to be a thief. Tracy often experiences offensive behaviors: whispers, stares, and flinches whenever she walks on the street since her father's arrest seven years ago. Those actions are forms of dislike due to the skin color, which has made Tracy feel unwanted. Here, individual discrimination occurs as the community classifies each member as white and black, as "us" or "them," resulting in prejudice that Tracy, as a black American, is just the same as her presumed criminal father. Because of this identity, she is not considered a part of the community but a threat.

The second event of individual discrimination is shown during Tracy's school life; she is assaulted by her peers and excluded by her teacher.

At school, kids were cruel. Recess was Justin Draper's favorite time to corner me. ... The trial was public, and everyone was talking about it. ... One day Justin just circled me, calling me the N-word. ... Justin yelled at me and punched me in the stomach. I was down on the ground, my heart hurting more than anything else. (Johnson, 2020, p. 50)

The school is no longer safe for Tracy as she experiences hatred, not only name-calling but also physical assault. In this event, the hate speech about her father's trial is a form of antilocution (Allport, 1954); bad-mouthing Tracy and her family continuously has created a group of people who dislike and even turn a blind eye toward the outrage that she suffers. This verbal aggression leads to violence, not only because Tracy is black but also because she is perceived as the daughter of a black criminal. How Justin hurts Tracy means that prejudice includes physical attack (Allport, 1954; Pincus & Ehrlich, 2018). As a victim of racism, Tracy suffers physical and emotional damage.

Another discriminatory act Tracy faces at school is the unanimous vote not to pick her as the school's editor.

'The last paper of the year is designed by the new editor,' Mr. Kaine says. 'There's been a shift.' I shake my head. New editor? The vote is supposed to be this coming Wednesday. 'When was the vote?' 'Friday.' Mr. Kaine looks down, avoiding my gaze. He could have stopped it if he thought things were unfair, but he didn't. ... 'You'll have to pitch 'Tracy's Corner' to Natalie and the executive board next year.' In one breath, he confirms that Natalie will be editor and I didn't even get enough votes to be on the executive board, after three years of putting in the work. (Johnson, 2020, p. 91)

The exclusion of Tracy from the voting process is an example of individual discrimination caused by her identity as a black. Her identity diminishes her three-year dedication as an editor. The discrimination of not including her even as a board member is predisposed by the dislike of her identity shown by the name calling, marking her the subject of exclusion, resulting in the prohibition of her as a member of the school's elite editorial board. In this case, Tracy experiences two forms of prejudice: avoidance and discrimination (Allport, 1954). The first refers to being socially excluded by her fellows of the school's paper, and the second refers to being denied the opportunity to keep her position as an editorial member. How her teacher does not prevent this unfair treatment suggests that the majority tends to work together to benefit their groups even when it means putting others at a loss.

The third event of individual discrimination can be seen through the bombing of Tracy's house-yard.

Before we get to the kitchen, a booming noise explodes outside. A roaring thump follows, and a hard pop and crash. I recoil, my hands covering my head as shattered glass shoots across the room. I'm stunned until I hit the ground, Dean hovering over me like a shield. The chaos is deafening. My world just exploded. (Johnson, 2020, pp. 163-164)

This event can be categorized as extreme actions of racial discrimination, a physical attack that is intentionally to threaten and hurt the victims. The bombing exhibits hatred against blacks. Physical attacks represent the human's negative emotions and thoughts (Allport, 1954). This attack ruins Tracy's house as her shelter and destroys her sense of living.

Our front window is destroyed. ... I realize there's a blazing cross, over ten feet tall, that's staked into our dry grass. The flames are catching the ground on fire. Bright and flashing. I cry out at the tall cross burning in our front yard. ... My eyes lock on the brick on the ground, paper wrapped on with what must be rubber bands. ... NO MORE WHITE LIVES LOST AT THE HANDS OF A BEAUMONT. NEXT TIME IT WILL BE A BODY WE BURN. -THE BROTHERHOOD- (Johnson, 2020, pp. 165-167)

A group of white supremacists has threatened Beaumont's household, and the result can be seen from the state of their broken property. They terrorize Tracy's family through two threatening acts: the action of burning the cross and the verbal threat in the letter. The cross burning is associated with the Ku Klux Klan, a white supremacist group known for using burning crosses as a symbol of terror, hatred, and intimidation, especially against black people and other marginalized communities (Khan, 2024). The letter shows embedded racial prejudice that blacks are criminals; even when there is not enough evidence, they vehemently accuse Mr. Beaumont and Jamal of murdering white Americans. This violent home invasion represents racial prejudice in the form of a physical attack; the yard bombing is intentionally performed to hurt the family (Allport, 1954).

### **Institutional Discrimination**

Institutional discrimination is an act that focuses on the laws, practices, procedures, and behaviors of the individuals within said institutions that purposely and have the intention to discriminate and undermine individuals of minority and marginalized groups (Pincus, 2000). In *This Is My America* (2020), there are two forms of institutional discrimination: the first is police brutality in arresting Tracy's father, Mr. Beaumont, and the second is court bias in prosecuting him.

The circumstance of institutional discrimination happens when Tracy's father was arrested unjustly and treated unlawfully during the apprehending process.

I take deep breaths, swallowing up the panic that's racing to my brain. I try and push down the memories of the time they came for Daddy. ... I screamed nonstop when Jamal opened the door and the cops pushed him aside. They rushed Daddy, threw him on the ground, and shoved a knee in his back. ... They beat his head down, expecting with each punch he was supposed to take it in silence. Each cry he made, they hit him harder until he shut his mouth and they cuffed him. (Johnson, 2020, p. 43)

Tracy's memory suggests that the police, as the representation of the law, fail to conduct innocence until proven guilty by attacking her helpless father. This event shows that institutional discrimination lies within the laws and those carrying them out (Pincus, 2018). This incarceration is based on racial prejudice; the police take it for granted that Mr. Beaumont is a criminal since he is black. As arresting him is not enough, the police turn to another black, Mr. Ridges, as the suspect of the Davidsons' murder.

The police shot up the house, hitting Quincy, who was my age, and killing Mr. Ridges with shots through the window. They didn't wait for a negotiator like they do on TV. They straight-up started shooting. After he was dead, it was easy to put blame on Mr. Ridges. They needed him to be guilty. ... Regardless of whether Mr. Ridges or Daddy owned a gun, they both had alibis. Their fingerprints were found in the office meeting room, along with the prints of multiple other people who'd met with the Davidsons, but it didn't seem to matter that their prints weren't found in the back, where the bodies were discovered. (Johnson, 2020, pp. 20-21)

The incident portrays police brutality; they intentionally hurt the black suspect, Mr. Ridges, even when he is harmless. Tracy's father, Mr. Beaumont, and his friend, Mr. Ridges, encounter institutional discrimination and biased treatment that put blacks into disadvantageous positions (Pincus & Ehrlich, 2018). The imbalance of power between the suspects and law enforcement in terms of using weapons for physical attacks rather than for self-defense and the neglect of lack of evidence make Tracy and Quincy's family collateral damage. Moreover, the unjust law is then fortified by appointing the all-white jury for Mr. Beaumont's trial. "They never found the murder weapon, and there were no witnesses. There should have been reasonable doubt, but the all-white jury felt otherwise (Johnson, 2020, p. 34). This situation refers to several things. First, appointing the all-white jury means denying opportunities for the defendant to be heard. Second, the all-white jury's decision that Mr. Beaumont is guilty without evidence is an act of prejudice; he is automatically the criminal because he is black. Third, the trial resulting in a death sentence means that law enforcement legally discriminates against him for his right to fair prosecution.

### **Structural Discrimination**

Structural discrimination focuses on laws that are neutral in their intent and the individuals implementing them but inadvertently still cause discrimination for minority and marginalized groups in the long run (Pincus & Ehrlich, 2018). It involves various

sectors, such as education, housing, politics, economics, legal, etc. In *This Is My America* (2020), the protagonist and her family experience structural discrimination in two forms: wealth disparity and media bias.

The wealth disparity between whites and blacks can be seen through the senior high graduation party; Tracy attends the party in an attempt to gather information about what happened to Angela as her brother, Jamal, is accused of murdering her.

The senior graduation party is the most exclusive party of the year, held at the biggest house. Which means usually most of the white kids go, and everyone else hitches rides with their white friends so the cops aren't called by neighbors-neighbors who are perfectly fine with ragers, but not a car full of black and brown kids. (Johnson, 2020, p. 143)

The passage implies that due to racial discrimination, blacks do not have the same access to success. In her community, the white kids have cars and bigger houses as the privilege of their white folks' wealth. Moreover, they are also immune to the indictment for bothering the neighborhood when partying. Meanwhile, a group of black teenagers is considered a nuisance that the police must secure. This bias also occurs in how the media presents Jamal as a convict when he has not been prosecuted yet.

Tracy's brother, Jamal, is accused of murdering Angela, a white girl. He is convicted just like their father; he is automatically considered guilty because he is black. This situation is perceived and spread over by the media.

They've got Jamal painted like a thug, standing between two other Black team members with blurred-out headshots, Dean and the other white teammates conveniently cropped out of the original photo. All Jamal was doing was being a teenager at a party, no harm. He was the designated driver that night, but the red cup sticks out. Now it don't matter he was hydrating with water before the early-morning run. (Johnson, 2020, p. 56)

The television news covers the case by creating the impression of Jamal as "the other" by cropping the photo, only showing him being with his black friends as if there was no interaction with his white friends. By doing this, the truth of Jamal as a good fellow athlete, he was drinking water before practice, is ruined; it is changed by the false context that Jamal is a drunk teenager. This context makes him fit as a murderer. Moreover, the cropped photo favors Dean and other whites from the impression of getting involved with the accused criminal. This media bias is structural discrimination denying the equal chance to prospects in life (Pincus, 2000). The presence of this bias, in the long run, maintains racial prejudice in many aspects of life.

When I watch the news, I can tell without even looking at the TV if the suspect is white or Black. A 'young man who lost his way' or 'was afflicted with mental illness' but 'had a promising future' = white. A 'thug' with 'trouble in school' = Black'. (Johnson, 2020, p. 136)

The passage indicates media bias in presenting whites and blacks by associating whites with a positive image and blacks with a negative image. When the possibility of a crime is present, whites are given the impression that they were good and will repent. Meanwhile, blacks have been seen as criminals since the beginning. This attitude reinforces racism, creating racial stereotypes, which are negative perceptions towards certain groups of people as the basis of oppression (Melson-Silimon et al., 2024). Thus, individual and institutional discrimination toward blacks will continue to form.

From the discussion above, Tracy and her family, the descendants of African Americans, experience racism in the form of stereotypes, prejudice, and discrimination. They are stereotyped as inferiors, prejudiced as criminals, and discriminated against as

not worthy of being equal to white Americans. Various racist acts are done due to the belief that whites are superior, thus granting them all the chances to oppress the blacks, situating them not only in disadvantageous but also in harmful ways. The novel's title, *This is My America*, symbolises that multicultural American societies should no longer prolong white supremacy.

## Conclusion

Kim Johnson's *This Is My America* (2020) portrays the issues of racism still happening in American society. The condition of diverse racial and ethnic groups, often called a melting pot, does not always refer to peace and togetherness. It highlights that some or most individuals of a majority group still have the concept and belief that they are of a superior race and other members from minority and marginalized groups are inferior and outsiders, which, as a result, manifests in racial discrimination. The black American characters in the novel experience three kinds of discrimination: individual, institutional, and structural, in the forms of verbal and physical attacks, unjust law, and media bias. This racial discrimination is influenced by white supremacy performing racial prejudice that blacks are inferior and thus deserve to be oppressed.

While discussing racism issues in English literature is still prominent, we also need to show how the characters resist racial discrimination. This study, for example, is limited to discussing oppression. Therefore, we suggest others expose the characters' efforts in fighting for their rights against racism. By doing so, hopefully, we postulate the understanding that although it is difficult for us to accept differences sometimes, it does not mean that differences threaten what we are regardless of any identity variables.

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