

**Racism as a menace to humanity: a critical
discourse analysis of racist language in
Wright's *Black boy*, Adichie's *Americanah*
and Floyed's *The latest suffocating utterance*
of "I can't breathe"**

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Abstract

Unarguably, racism is one of the unending historical pandemic that threatens the black race by the white race till date specifically in America, Europe and other westernized countries. In spite of the avowed decline in public support for racist behavior in this twenty- first century; instituting of different international agencies fighting for humanity and equality, Obama's presidential regime and other strategic positions occupied by the blacks in the western world, racism, in its varying forms of manifestation, remains embedded in the whites' psyche and their perception of Africans and the black race. Sadly, blacks, African immigrants are regular victims of the scourge of racism. This work adopts critical discourse analysis as propounded by Fairclough and tends to uncover how whites' ideology, power and

historical legacy are used as a weapon of oppression and dominance in the selected utterances in Wright's Black Boy, Adichie's Americanah, and Floyd's latest suffocating utterance of "I can't breathe." The findings show that the dehumanization and second class treatment in racist language-use by the whites as a result of their acclaimed historical superiority against the blacks are seen as a great threat to humanity. Further findings show that racism still lingers on in this contemporary era on a daily basis, though subtly manifested and life threatening, in reference to Floyd's suffocating utterance of "I can't breathe." This research work concludes that racism is not only a threat but an age long pandemic metted against the blacks by the whites, which manifest itself in actions and language use. Furthermore, it is a weapon of dominance by the white race to maintain the claimed "White Superiority" and "Black Inferiority." In this case, many blacks encounter challenges on daily basis with the Whites, due to racial prejudice, discrimination and segregation. The researcher recommends that in the bid to save humanity and the future generation, there is urgent need to create more awareness on the dangers of racism and enlighten the whites on the concept of colour-blindness to ensure peace and harmony in the society irrespective of race, or skin colour.

Introduction

Undoubtedly, throughout the history of the Whites, specifically, America, their dominant culture has decided and controlled a social hierarchy that has been overtly and covertly biased against the Blacks; African-Americans, Nigeria immigrants, Africans and asylum seekers. Consequently, the institution of American slavery, the ugliest blemish in the history, the most revolting practice within the vicinity of humanity, was based upon the unfounded concept of the white supremacy.

Historically, the concept of race in the 19th century was built on biological basis and was use to explain the superiority of Europeans. However the end of colonialization era and World War II brought about a change and transformation of racism. Science has shown that there is no biological basis for the concept of race and racism have been reincarnated or reborn in the form of White cultural nationalism (Kundnani, 1963).

Observably or noticeably, one point that continues to stand out in this foregoing is that somehow, always, racism survives! Therefore one has tangible reasons and evidence to submit that racism has yet to end, and has even assumed subtle but more dangerous dimensions. Ngugi (1993) locates core racism in Europe contemporary engagements with Africa, even as he highlights its various but subtle ways of manifestations. Ngugi (1993) writes that:

racism is ideological weapon and it comes wrapped up in many forms: as religion, the arts, the media, culture, values, beliefs, even as feelings. It is one of the most devastating of all ideological weapons wielded by imperialism today and it is meant to safeguard the entire system of exploitation of the many by the few in one nation and among nations...the great divide between the west and the third world

wears a racial camouflage: it is largely the whites of European stock versus the dark races of the earth...ideology and practice of racism facilitates...exploitation.

Here, Ngugi makes a vital link between racism and imperialism. Therefore even the academia cannot be said to be free from the scourge of racism. As a demonstration of exploitation and domination, Ngugi (1993) writes that racism is capable of moulding and remoulding...personalities and...perceptions of the exploited to make them view the world in accordance with the needs and programmes of the exploiter and the oppressor.

Discursively, racism is about society as a whole and the relations between different societies, their structures, processes and the power relationship they embody; the way in which some groups of people profit from the

systematic exclusion and subordination of other groups (Kudnani 10). Basically, an important aspect of racism for discursive character, Wodak and Reisigl (2001) stress this fact and argue that racism are expressed and spread through discourse and yet at the same time, this discriminatory discourse promulgate and legitimize the discriminatory practices. The terms ‘race’ and ‘racial’ in inverted commas to emphasize that races do not exist biologically, but are merely social constructions based on the common sense perceptions of superficial differences of appearance, mostly of skin colour (Simpson and Meyer, 2010). Racism on the other hand, which is predicated on these imagined biological differences, is real and can be defined as a system of ethnic or racial inequality, just like sexism, or inequality based on class.

Societies are no longer static; disembeddedness, change, and flux are the order of the day, and language as an expression of our culture and society reflects those changes and our attitudes to them. The common assertion that “language mirrors society” is taken to a higher level through a critical examination of individuals that constitute a society---their interests, beliefs and impact on society. Basically, without language human beings cannot communicate, interact, and tell their experience to each other. Fairclough (2001) said that modern society in this time of execution of power progressively mounted and reached to ideology which is

peculiarly launched through language intercession. In this matter, language is socially and historically action formed within social structure. Therefore, language itself is neutral, a vehicle for conveying the attitude of its users; it has no agenda or bias of its own, but rather reflects and reinforces those of people who use it. Consequently, creative writers often use language in their own ways to achieve beauty and meaning. They express their message, feelings, attitudes, experiences and world-views by means of language. Employing the language of racism in Wright's *Black Boy*, Adichie's *Americanah*, and Floyd's *'I can't breathe'* is to critically analyze the derogatory slurs, insults, impolite forms of address, discrimination and negative attitudes of racism.

Critical Discourse Analysis is one of the most widely acclaimed theoretical models in modern linguistics. It is the search for pattern of language use that may be linked to social or power structure and ideological colourings that gave rise to Critical Discourse Analysis which combines linguistic analysis, ideological critique and cognitive psychology. CDA is a type of discourse analytical approach that primarily studies the way social power abuse, dominance and inequality are enacted, reproduced and resisted by text and talk in the social and political context. This is in line with Wodak (2001) argues that CDA aims to investigate social inequality as it is signalled, expressed, constituted

and legitimized . It insists that all representation is mediated, moulded by the value systems that are ingrained in the medium used for representation. CDA challenges common sense by pointing out that something could have been represented some other way, with very different significance. In other words, CDA sees discourse as a form of social practice and argues that all linguistic usage encodes ideological positions, and studies how language mediates and represents the world from different points of view. It is the connection between ideas, language, power and the ordering of relationship within society that is important for those involved in CDA.

Analysis of Wright's *Black Boy* and Adichie's *Americanah*

Question 1: To what extent is the whites ideology on racism portrayed in the three selected texts?

Text 1: Wright's *Black Boy*

Data 1: “You will never be a writer,” she said. “ Who on earth put such ideas into your nigger head?” Pg 129

Data 2: “They tell me my dog bit you,” he said.

“Yes, sir.”

I pulled down my trousers and he looked.

“Humnnn,” he grunted, then laughed. “A dog bite can't hurt a nigger.” Pg 142

Data 3: “Nigger, you think you’ll ever amount to anything?”...

“If I was a nigger, I’d kill myself,” he said. Pg 165

Text 2: Adichie’s *Americanah*

Data 4: He told her that he and his wife had adopted a black child, and their neighbours looked at them as though they had chosen to become matyrs for a dubious act. Pg 15

Data 5: She wants to practice dermatology and most of our patients here are blacks and she said skin diseases look different on black skin and she knows she will not end up practicing in a black area, so she wants to go where the patient will be white. Pg 167

Data 6: “You people never do anything right.” Pg 213

Data 7: They mimicked what Americans told them: *You speak such good English. How bad is AIDS in your country? It’s so sad that people live on less than a dollar a day in Africa.* Pg 163

Basically, in text 1 above, in the era of Wright, Whites had this doctrine that Blacks are sub-human, and products of slaves that will never amount to anything as in data 1 where a white woman abuses Wright by condemning Wright’s idea of becoming a writer in his lifetime and data 3 where a white man says that niggers (Blacks) will never amount to anything and that nigger’s

life is approximated to death. In data 2 Wright's boss tells him that 'a dog bite cannot hurt a nigger' which implies that niggers are sub-human that don't feel pain like them, in fact to him Blacks are bloodless being. The use of "boy" for Africans and "man" for whites reveal the ideology of African inferiority. Judging from the data presented above, it is clear following Fairclough's postulations that Ideologies are common-sense assumptions that people bring into the interpretation of the above texts. This concurs with his theory of Critical Discourse Analysis which he presents ideology one of its basic tenets. The above racist utterances bear the ideologies of the Whites against black which is unfounded and groundless.

Yet in this twenty-first century whenever black is being mentioned to the Whites they still have that ideology of historical legacy of racism embedded in their psyche; based on the assumption of the blacks as racially inferior, while the white race as a superior race. Imagine in data 5 a white doctor saying that skin disease look different on black skin that she would like to practice where the skin is white, this utterance is formed on the basis of her ideology of black skin. In data 4, for one to adopt a black child it is seen as a dubious act, meaning that it looks weird and sinful to them for one to adopt a black child. Since American- Blacks originated from African continent, Whites have this concept of primitivism, conflict, underdevelopment, crudity about

Africa as in data 10 where they mimicked what Americans told them. The Whites' ideologies of Blacks as defaulters of unfounded allegations as in data 6 "you people never do anything right", to the Whites anything about the Blacks is a big deal. The ideology of whites against the Blacks presented above conforms with Fairclough's (1995) on how ideology are manipulated in language.

Question 2: How do the authors' works depict power-relation in the three selected texts?

Text 3 "Wright's *Black Boy*"

Data 8: White folks say they'll kill all his kinfolks. Pg 46

Data 9: "But the white men have guns and the black men don't." Pg 50

Data 10: Do you know what the Kukluxers do to coloured people? "They kill us, they keep us from getting a good job." Pg 114

Data 12: Bob had been caught by the white death, the threat of which hung over every black in the South. Pg 150

Data 13: The boss, his son and the clerk treated the Negroes with open contempt, pushing, kicking, or slapping them. Pg 157

As regards racism, in text 2 above, we see how Whites as dominant groups used all possible means to secure domination against the minorities (blacks). The African- Americans are the one subsumed under the white man. Wright growing up under the “Jim Crow Laws” which institutionalized segregation and inequality against the blacks just like Wright in data 13, he remembers the tale of the white man who had beaten the black boy. In data 10, The Ku Klux Klan is a right-wing extremist organization in the United States which aimed at the “purification” of the American society by eliminating the blacks who defaults the laws. The power structure is bent on destroying the humanity of the Negroe and thereby making them feel less human. In the era of *Black Boy* the Whites have guns while the Blacks have none as in data 9 and gun signifies power, therefore Whites are the only people that are authorized to have such weapon. They used their power to slay the blacks as animals just like they killed Ned’s brother Bob, in data 12. They dehumanize Blacks by beating, slapping, spitting, kicking just like the boss and his son in data 13. The Blacks are always victims to different forms of racism .In the above text 3, the racist utterances displayed the realization of power-relation which is an awful act to humanity. Therefore, in the above text analyzed, in line with critical discourse analysis which serves as a tool to expose power, abuse, and dominance that are present in written and spoken texts, Fairclough

succeeds in defining the relationship between power and language in essence to CDA.

Text 4 :Adichie's*Americanah*

Data 14: She gave sunscreen to everyone but she wouldn't give me any. Pg 215

Data 15: They beat him in school because of black accent.

Data 16: "Why are the Dankest, Drabbest Parts of American Cities Full of American Blacks?" Pg 358

The above racist utterances in text 4 which contain power- relation represent the subtle forms of racism in this twenty-first century where racism is outlawed in contrast to text 3. Critical discourse analysis, tries to uncover the opaqueness and power relationship in the form of social action that attempt to intervene and bring about change in communicative and socio-political practice. In data 15, the word "beat" signify power relation in the society, Dike is beaten in school because of black accent . In data 14 Dike's entitlement to sunscreen is being denied by the teacher because she has the power or authority to give and deny whomsoever she feels to. In data 16, because of the power the Whites gained they dominated the most beautiful places in America and Europe while the Blacks dominated dankest and the drabbest part of the cities. The above text 4 analysis agrees with Fairclough (1995) which maintains

that the hidden assumptions and power relations that are contained within societal discourses often go unquestioned because, through institutional practices, they are able to remain a natural part of the everyday social reality .

Research Question 3: To what extent does the three selected texts historically represent the degree of racism at the time of their publication?

Text 5: Wright's *Black Boy*

Data 17: When I boarded the train I was aware that we Negroes where in one part of the train and that the whites were in another. Pg 39

Data 18: "Who gave her that name?"

"The white man who owned her"

"She was a slave?"

"Yes." Pg 40

Data 19: There are no hospital facilities for coloured and this is the way we do it. Pg 86

Data 20: "Did you ever hear of the Ku Klux Klan?" Pg 114

Data 21: "Bob had been caught by the white death, the threat of which hung over every male black in the south."

Data 22: Among the topics that southern white men did not like to discuss with Negroes were the following; the

Ku Klux Klan, American white women, Negro soldiers fared with their French women, Jack Johnson, the entire northern part of the United States, the civil war, Abraham Lincoln, U.S Grant, General Sherman, social equality, slave trade..., or any topic calling for positive knowledge or manly self -assertion on the part of the Negro. Pg 202

The question in text 10 is based on CDA's feature of being historical and that is tracing the root of the contemporary racism and on the basis that racism is a historical legacy of colonialism. During Wright's era in the 19th century racism was rife, raw and bleeding. The accounts of dehumanization exacted upon Wright and other Blacks were traumatic and destructive. The 'Jim Crow Laws' was one of the historical aspects of racism and it was effective as at that time and the laws institutionalized segregation of African-American people from Euro-American people. The segregation was connected with places such as public swimming pools; public means of transport, hospitals, public restaurants as in data 17 when Wright boarded a train and noticed that they were segregated from the Whites etc. They were also connected with marriage and the court of law where African- Americans could not testify against Euro-Americans. They managed to create two separate worlds, the one world was the world of the 'Whites' and the world of the 'Blacks'. Furthermore the doctrine of the "Ku Klux Klan" was one of the practice of racism at that

era and it's a racist organisation that roamed the South and illegally persecuted African- Americans as in data 20 and 21 where Ned's brother Bob was killed by the white death. For the Blacks in the old era, racism manifest in the cold floor of a jail; in sore backs strained from underpaying jobs, in a substandard apartment, the rape of black women, the strangling of dissidents and slave trade which is also analyzed in data 18 where Wright asks his grand-ma how their grand parents' bear the White's man name . In connection with data 22 analysis, the above historical analysis is pronounced or noticed in it.

Text 6: Adichie's *Americanah*

Data 23: “English people will live next to you for years but they will never greet you. It is as if they have buttoned themselves up.” Pg 274

Data 24: When you are black in America and you fall in love with a white person, race doesn't matter when you are alone with him together because it's just you and your love.

But the minute you step outside race matters. Pg 335

Data 25: “Why her?” Looks ... she had seen the looks before on the faces of white women, strangers on the street, who would see her hand clasped in Curt's, and instantly cloud their faces with that look. Pg 337

Data 26: “Table for one?” Pg 339

Data 27: "... we were the only black kids in our class. All our friends wanted us to date, you know how they think the two black kids just have to be together, but he so wasn't my type," Araminta said. Pg 356

Historically, slavery and segregation of the seventeenth through twentieth centuries has been replaced by the subtle, sophisticated racism of the twenty-first century. The subtle racism of the twenty-first century is civilizational racism a mindset that assumes whiteness to be normative and superior. While the trails of Jim Crow are behind them, the momentum of history has carried civilization racism into the present. Today due to the lasting impact of their history the White subconscious is socialized to presume that white flesh is more valuable than dark flesh. *Americanah* was born out of the contradictions of American society, that although race is central to the nation's history, a few fact deny Americans often seem to struggle to see the ways that historical legacy continues to influence life today. Based on CDA's historical feature, Adichie's *Americanah* is note-worthy contribution to the manifestation of racism which is carefully disguised in this twenty-first century. In data 23 Though Whites and Blacks live together which means the degree of racism is mild unlike in the past when they were segregated, yet that historical legacy of superiority still lives in them and makes them not to greet the Blacks as portrays in *Americanah*. Furthermore in relationship affairs between

Whites and Blacks just like Ifemelu and Curt in data 24, 25, and 26, tension formed in their relationship because of race. People stare when they are walking across the street holding hands, unlike in the past when it was an abomination for a white to have an affair with a black. When they arrive at a restaurant, a waiter asks Curt if he wants a table for one, to show the inexistence of Ifemelu. These are all disguised manifestation of racism as regards to historical legacy and it's degree is not marked unlike in the past. Finally in this twenty-first century White and black kids school together in contrast to previous centuries where the black kids are being segregated from the white kids as portrayed in data 27.

Data 28: Analysis of Floyd's "I can't breathe"

This three dying letter words "I can't breathe" uttered by Floyd could be described as the slogan appropriate in this twenty-first century racism. The death of Floyd could be seen as the culmination of the process of systemic and structural racism of the white race against the black race. The outrage over Floyd's death also reflects years of frustration over socio-economic, inequality, and discrimination.

The researcher sees racism as a historical pandemic, because during Floyd's "I can't breathe" era, the blacks were prepared to stand up and say 'get your knees off our necks,' they were prepared to risk being afflicted with Corona-virus, so they could echo their traumatic

emotions as regards this age-long racial pandemic which has been historically intertwined in different strata in America; an age-long pandemic that has no permanent cure, a pandemic that has made them sub human and breathless for ages.

Semantically, Floyd's "I can't breathe" equates racism with not just deprivation of freedom, but also deprivation of air, which is the right to live as a human beings. The graphic representation of the police officer Derek Chauvin kneeling on Floyd's neck thereby choking him to death wasn't a mere accident, but he was acting under the influence of racial historical legacy, oppressive power, and constructive ideologies of white supremacy. Graphically, Floyd's suffocating state signifies the age-long oppression, depression, suffocation, segregation, dehumanization, of the blacks in the hands of the whites on daily basis in education, health services, employment, policing, housing, and other areas. It could be vividly seen as the racial injustice of this contemporary era.

Conclusion

This study concludes that racism is not only a threat but an age long pandemic metted against the blacks by the whites, in America, Europe, and western countries, which manifest itself in actions and language use. The manipulation of language of racism and racist actions by the Whites against the Blacks is as a result of ideology,

social stratification, power, dominance, and other historical and sociological factors. Racism as an emotive subject is dehumanizing and cannot be ignored because the world is composed of different races from different continents. In this case, many Blacks have problem or difficulties in the aspect of their lives due to the racial prejudice, discrimination, and segregation they experience. The necessity of using hospitable attitude, unprejudiced and polite language is fundamental towards achieving peace and harmony within the vicinity of humankind. The researcher recommends that in the bid to save humanity and the future generation, a real and sustained effort must be undertaken to challenge the western structure at an epistemic level and bring about a reconfiguration of power relations in the society. However, there is urgent need to create massive awareness on the dangers of racism and enlighten the whites on the concept of colour-blindness to ensure peace and harmony in the society irrespective of race or skin colour.

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