



THE WHITE'S FELONY IN FIVE POEMS

BY BENJAMIN ZEPHANIAH

Fitri Handayani¹, Kurnia Ningsih², Desvalini Anwar³

English Department

Faculty of Languages and Arts

State University of Padang

email: ipithandayani31@gmail.com

Abstract

This study is aimed to expose the issue about the White's felony which is done by the white people toward the Black and to know the contribution of poetic elements; imagery, irony and repetition in revealing the issue of the White's felony. This analysis is related to the concept of *Otherness* by Edward Said in post-colonial approach. The result of this analysis shows that the White's felonies are done by the policemen, parliament members and societies.

Key words: Felony, The White, The Black

A. INTRODUCTION

Despite the launch of equality before the law, it is still found these days that people tend to use skin color as a benchmark to judge others. It is still used as a measurement to determine whether someone should be placed in respectable position or not. Consequently, skin color also influences the way people act on others. This happens because some people think that their position is more respectable than others. This kind of attitude is still very much evident in how the light skinned race such as those from the Caucasian race tend to see and present themselves holier, more honorable and more ethical than those with dark skin color who are viewed as less ethical, uncivilized and are even seen as those who fulfill the criminals' criteria. After all, this condition shows that people with light skin color think that they are superior to the dark ones.

Mostly, the ones considered as the inferior are the Black or colored people and the ones considered as the superior are the White people. Based on that consideration, the white people legalize themselves to commit felony toward the Black or colored people. Ironically, the felony is enacted by involving the State's apparatus, such as policemen and parliament members. The felony is so barbaric since it affects the victims physically and mentally. Physically, the felony is enacted through bully, torture and even murder. Mentally, the felony was enacted

¹ English ELLSP of English Department of FBS Universitas Negeri Padang graduated on June 2018

² Lecturer of English Department of FBS Universitas Negeri Padang

³ Lecturer of English Department of FBS Universitas Negeri Padang



through ignoring, humiliating, and marginalizing the Black. With their power as the State's apparatus, the White committed those felonies behind the mask of law. They acted as if their action was based on the law. Here, it can be seen that they manipulated and abused the law.

Benjamin Zephaniah has written a literary work –poetry- which is related to the issue of the White's felony. His five poems which are related to this topic are *The Death of Joy Gardner* (1996), *Dis Policeman Keeps on Kicking Me to Death* (1989), *What Stephen Lawrence Has Taught Us* (1999), *Biko the Greatness* (2001) and *Walking Black Home* (1999). Through his work, Benjamin Zephaniah tries to against any kind of wickedness and injustice which happen in this world, particularly in Britain. He did it because for him, people should be equal no matter who they are or where they come from, they deserve to be respected by others. Benjamin says that he prefers to concern to person's condition. He is going to give a hand to those who need it. He will do it without looking at the skin color of that person. In other words, the most important thing for him is anyone deserves to get human right as long as they are human being.

Five poems by Benjamin Zephaniah show the issue of the White's felony. The White's felony in this analysis refers to the crime imposed by the white people toward the Black. Their crimes are so barbaric, and many lead to death. Ironically, the crime is even committed by the State's apparatus such as policemen and parliament members. As the State's apparatus, they commit the crime behind the mask of law. They act as if their action are based on the law. In another word, they try to build an image that they have done the right thing. However, some people who are represented by the speaker of each poem realize that the apparatus has done something wrong. They know that it is a barbaric crime. Unfortunately, the victims cannot do much since they have no power. They are only citizen who cannot defeat the apparatus. Here, it can be seen that the white people are so crafty that they look like devils. In this analysis, the White's felony is enacted by the policemen, parliament members, and the societies.

The first is the policemen's felony. This topic is analyzed by using imagery, irony and repetition. The policemen commit violence to the Black when they arrest them. Then, the policemen torture the Black when they investigate them. The last, the policemen torture the Black in jail. They act brutally to the victim in jail. These felonies are enacted physically and mentally. This issues are exposed by poem 1 (*The Death of Joy Gardner*), poem 2 (*Dis Policeman Keeps on Kicking Me to Death*) and poem 3 (*What Stephen Lawrence Has Taught Us*).

The second is the parliament members' felony. The poetic elements which are used in this topic are imagery, irony and repetition. The felony of the parliament members can be seen from how they protect the White's crime. They cover up the felony committed by the white people toward the Black. They also ignore the Black, they do not care about the Black's suffering. The last, the parliament members subordinate the Black, they humiliate them. These acts of felony are exposed by poem 1 (*The Death of Joy Gardner*), poem 2 (*Dis Policeman Keeps on Kicking Me to Death*), poem 3 (*What Stephen Lawrence Has Taught Us*) and poem 4 (*Biko the Greatness*).

The last is the societies' felony. This topic is also analyzed by using imagery, irony and repetition. The felony of the societies can be seen from how the white societies marginalize the Black. They do not want to interact with the Black as the way they do among them. Then, they also kill the Black. These acts of felony are exposed by poem 2 (*Dis Policeman Keeps on Kicking Me to Death*), poem 3 (*What Stephen Lawrence Has Taught Us*) and poem 5 (*Walking Black Home*).

The study about the White's felony in five poems by Benjamin Zephaniah has not been found yet. However, there are two studies which have given contribution in analyzing these five poems. The first is study by Barbora Vidasicova entitled *Immigrant Experience in West Indian British Poetry* (2015). The second study is by Ria Resky Hardianti entitled *Racism Reflected in Maya Angelou's Poem* (2016).

The first is study by Barbora Vidasicova entitled *Immigrant Experience in West Indian British Poetry* (2015). She analyzed poems by three poets: James Berry (*Migrants in London, Beginning in a City, and On An Afternoon*), Benjamin Zephaniah (*No Problem and The Death of Joy Gardner*) and John Agard (*Palm Tree King and Remember the Ship*). This study deals with the concept of racism by Glynne Gordon. Barbara involves the elements of poetry such as tone, imagery and paradox to analyze the poems. The result of the study is, there is a different experience of the first generation of West Indian immigrants and the second generation in facing racism. The first generation appears to have adopted an attitude of passive resistance toward the discrimination and stereotypes. On the other hand, the second generation actively resists and rejects the stereotypes. They also challenge the mainstream society to change their mindset and attitude and shift their attentions toward the real people and their stories.

The second study is by Ria Resky Hardianti entitled *Racism Reflected in Maya Angelou's Poem* (2016). Ria uses all poems written by Maya Angelou to be discussed in her thesis. There are 13 poems by Maya Angelou, which are analyzed by using the concept of sociological approach in racism perspective by Rene Wellek. This concept helps her to understand the connection of racism in Maya Angelou's poems and Maya Angelou's background. The poems are; *My Guilt, The Calling of Names, On Working White Liberals, The Thirteens (Black), The Thirteens (White), Harlem Hopscotch, Africa, America, One More Round, Ain't that Bad?, Our Grandmother, Riot:60s and Sepia Fashion Show*. In order to reveal the issue of racism in these poems, she uses elements of poetry such as diction, imagery and symbol. The study focuses on exposing the action of racism specifically the action of the white people toward the black people. The result of the study shows that racism exists in 13 poems by Maya Angelou. There are some kind of actions which show that racism felt by the black people. They are slavery, discrimination, segregation, hegemony, prejudice and stereotype.

The study of the White's felony relates to the concept of *Otherness* by Edward Said in post-colonial approach. Based on the historical event, the West colonized the East since they were considered as the weak countries. Some of these weak countries were Middle East, Asia, and North Africa. While the West refers to Europeans. Post-colonial era begins when the colonization era ended. It

indicates that the West must not colonize the East anymore. However, the West still think that they are superior to the East. They do not want to be equal with the East in any aspect of life. Hence, the term *Otherness* emerged. Said in his book entitled *Culture and Imperialism* (1993:210) mentions that the construction of *Self* and *Other* are constructed by cultural imperialism image and literary text that reflect other as barbaric, uncivilized, uneducated, and full of mistakes. In addition, Staszak in his study entitled *Other/Otherness* (2008:2) says that *Otherness* begins by considering one group is better in any aspect of live than the other groups. As a result, they stigmatize the other groups as the one who have no identity. This cause *the Self* can discriminate *the Other*. Therefore, they legitimate themselves to commit felony toward *the Other*.

B. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The analysis of five poems by Benjamin Zephaniah entitled *The Death of Joy Gardner* (1996), *Dis Policeman Keeps on Kicking Me to Death* (1989), *What Stephen Lawrence Has Taught Us* (1999), *Biko the Greatness* (2001) and *Walking Black Home* (1999) is done through text and context-based interpretation. These poems are analyzed by combining the elements of poetry; imagery, irony and repetition. Each of that element contributes to reveal the White's felony. Imagery is used to reveal the condition and the atmosphere in the poems. Irony shows the unexpected behavior from the White as apparatus. Repetition is use to confirm the barbaric felony of the White. These devices are also connected to context-based interpretation. It deals with the concept of *Otherness* by Edward Said in post-colonial approach.

C. DISCUSSION

This section reveals *the White's felony* by using the elements of poetry; imagery, irony and repetition. The White's felony in this study is enacted by the policemen, parliament members and societies.

1. Policemen

This topic focuses on discussing the acts of felony by the White, State's apparatus –policemen- toward the Black. This felony can be seen from how they arrest, interrogate, and torture the Black. First is how they arrest the Black. The policemen commit violence to the Black when they arrest them. It can be seen from the following quotation:

*They put a leather belt around her
13 feet of tape and bound her
Handcuffs to secure her
And only God knows what else,
(Poem 1, stanza 1)*

Through imagery, it can be revealed that the treatment of the policemen in arresting the Black is so barbaric. In this stanza, the victim is a black woman. The policemen use leather belt and handcuffs to tie the body and secure the hands of the victim. This indicates as if this black woman is a great criminal and a very

dangerous person. Yet, the policemen do not have any evidence to prove it. The using of handcuffs also can be included into mental violence. Dragging victim with handcuffs on her hands, makes people think that she is a real criminal. This condition certainly affects her mental. It causes disgrace to her. Another violence that the policemen do to her is they use 13 feet of tape to bind her. The tape may block oxygen that makes it difficult for her to breathe. Furthermore, the line */And only God knows what else/* indicates that the treatment do not finish yet. It still continues in a way which cannot be imagined by people. In other words, the treatment has reached to a very cruel action. Only God can see this action because it is too sadistic. Ironically, this violence is committed by policemen who are supposed to prevent violence. Here, it can be seen that this policemen treat the Black not as human being, but just like an object.

Furthermore, the quotation below exposes the craftiness of the policemen in covering their felony to the Black woman.

*She's illegal, so deport her
Said the Empire that brought her
She died,
Nobody killed her
And she never killed herself.
(Poem 1, stanza 1)*

This quotation shows a beautiful irony. It seems the policemen have right to commit felony. The line */She's illegal/* is used as a legitimation for the policemen to enact the felony. The fact is they commit the felony to her because she is Other. It seems very easy to commit felony towards people just based on their skin color. Here, it can be seen that the Black are marginalized by the White. This is absolutely unfair. The treatment of the policemen leads the victim to death. Unfortunately, no one takes responsible for that, as if it is normal. The contradiction between sentence */Nobody killed her/* and */And she never killed herself/* convinces it. It is ridiculous that someone died without any reason.

Second, the felony of the policemen is shown from how to interrogate the Black. The policemen torture the Black during the investigation. It is enacted through physical and mental torture. It can be seen from the following quotation:

*Him beat me so badly
I was on the floor
Him said if I don't plead guilty
Him gwan kick me more
(Poem 2, stanza 5)*

Visual imagery appears strongly in this quotation. Here, the policemen force the Black to admit the crime. They do that by torturing him until he says 'yes' to the accusation. This action shows that the victim convinces the crime since he is in a bad painful. He cannot stand the torture. That is why he finally admits the accusation. This is absolutely an epic violence which is committed by the policemen.

Third, the felony of the policemen also can be seen from how to torture the Black in jail. The policemen act brutally to the victim in jail. It can be seen from the following quotation:

*Like a thief in the dark he take me to de
Place where he just left
And when him get me in der
He is kicking me to death.
Dis policeman, dis policeman
Dis policeman keeps on kicking me to death*
(Poem 2, stanza 3)

Unlike the recent quotation, this stanza uses repetition to strengthen the point. This repetition indicates that the action of the policemen is just incredible. This policemen are the State's Apparatus who should take good care of the citizen. However, in this case, they are the one who commit sadistic violence to the citizen by humiliating and torturing them. It can be seen that this policemen are more criminal than the real one.

Clearly, the poetic elements that give contribution in this analysis are imagery, irony and repetition. This poetic elements expose the detail felony which is enacted by the policemen toward the Black. They commit that felony in three situations; in arresting, interrogating, and torturing the Black in jail. In other words, the real criminal here are not the Black, but the White who work as the policemen.

2. Parliament Members

This topic focuses on discussing the acts of felony by the White, State's apparatus –parliament members- toward the Black. In fact, this parliament members are even craftier than the policemen. They are criminals who work behind the scene. They plan the unfair rule for the Black and make it become law. In other words, they are the promoters of all the White's felony. In order to make it more detail, the felony of this parliament members will be divided into three; how to protect the White's crime, ignore the Black and subordinate them. First is how to protect the White's crime. The parliament members cover up the felony enacted by the White toward the Black. It can be proven by the quotation below:

*We know who the killers are,
We have watched them strut before us
As proud as sick Mussolini',
We have watched them strut before us
Compassionless and arrogant,
They paraded before us,
Like the angels of death
Protected by the law*
(Poem 3, stanza 1)

This stanza exposes about the death of a young black man named Stephen Lawrence. This poem is based on reality. Stephen Lawrence was killed by a group of young white men. In fact, this case is just disappeared and nobody discuss

about it. It must be someone who has covered up the case. It can be seen from the phrase in line 7 and 8 */Like the angels of death protected by the law/*. The line shows that the one who cover up the crime are they who can control the law. Only one answer for this riddle, they are the parliament members. Through imagery, it can be seen how the White can enjoy their life even after they did a murder case. They can do their activity normally without any fearful feeling. This is absolutely unfair for the Black.

The second act of felony by the parliament members is, how to ignore the Black. They do not care about the Black's suffering. This is proven by the quotation below:

*I got me up and took me to de place fe human rights
A notice on the door said 'Sorry, we are closed tonight'
So I turn round and took myself to see dis preacher guy
Who told me 'bout some heaven
Dat was in the bloody sky
(Poem 2, stanza 4)*

Through irony, it can be seen how the parliament members ignore the Black when they ask for justice and protection. This quotation shows that justice is only for the White. This is proven from how easy they say 'No' for the request of the Black. In fact, the meaning of the sentence in line 2 */Sorry, we are closed tonight/* is deeper than the literally meaning. The parliament members refuse to give a help for the Black since for them, the Black do not deserve justice. They just deserve all these injustices without being able to protest the State's apparatus. Perhaps, that is the reason why the Black are in their country, to be the victims of the White. In other words, this is the reason behind the White's happiness.

The last felony acted by the parliament members is how to subordinate the Black. The first quotation that exposes about this argument is:

*It is now an open secret
Black people do not have
Chips on their shoulders,
They just have injustice on their backs
And justice on their minds,
And now we know that the road to liberty
Is as long as the road from slavery
(Poem 3, stanza 2)*

What a sad fact this is. The White especially the parliament members really subordinate the Black. The word *chip* in line 3 means a rank or position. It means people who have this chip are the ones who have an important position in a State. Unfortunately, the Black are never given a chance to occupy that position, not because they are stupid or uneducated, but just because of the skin color. Irony plays strongly in this stanza, especially in the sentence in line 4 */They just have injustice on their backs and justice on their minds/*. This sentence deeply reveals that justice will never be obtained by the Black. They only can dream about what it feels to have justice. This humiliation seems to be equal with the slavery. In fact, it even worse than the slavery since this is committed in a very crafty way.

The next quotation also shows about the parliament members who subordinate the Black cruelly. It is stated as follow:

*Wickedness tried to kill greatness
In a corner of South Africa
Where they believed there were
No mothers and fathers
And
Where they believed
One could not hear the cries of another
Wickedness tried to kill greatness*
(Poem 4, stanza 1)

It can be seen from the stanza that the white people consider the Black as creature who just breathe, eat, and then die. It seems the black people do not know about social relation, how to think, and do not have painful feeling. Even worst, the white people think that the Black do not know the meaning of 'parents'. Obviously this is a great humiliation. Even animals know which their parents are and which are not. Furthermore, the repetition appears strongly in this stanza. The sentence */Wickedness tried to kill greatness/* is repeated twice in the same stanza. This is aimed to strengthen the point that the parliament members really humiliate the Black. The word *Wickedness* refers to the White while the *Greatness* refers to the Black. Here, it can be seen that there is a resistance from the Black. The Black realize that the White especially the parliament members are not different from the demons since they have lost a sense of humanity.

Clearly, the analysis above is mostly using irony as the poetic element. However, another poetic elements such as imagery and repetition also play their part in this analysis. They give contribution in revealing the craftiness of the parliament members in committing their felony. The irony exposes that the parliament members are actually the promoters of the White's felony. Since they have power to arrange the law, they think they can do whatever they like. In detail, the felony of this parliament members can be seen in three ways; the way they cover up the White's crime, ignore the Black, and subordinate them.

3. Societies

The last topic of this analysis is the acts of felony committed by the white societies toward the Black. Their felony can be seen from; how to marginalize the Black, and how to kill the Black. First is how to marginalize the Black. The white societies do not want to interact with the Black as the way they do among them. They treat the Black unfairly. It can be seen from the quotation below:

*Sometimes it's hard
To get a taxi
When you're Black*
(Poem 5, stanza 1)

The stanza above clearly shows that the white societies treat the Black unfairly. Through imagery, it can be seen how difficult to be black people. Even to get something paid, in this case a taxi, it is very difficult for them. Certainly, it is

impossible for them to get a hand from the White. If in the simplest case such getting a taxi can be that difficult, it must be more complicated with another case. Like discussing in a public forum for example, surely the Black will not be involved. They will be marginalized by the white societies.

Here is another evidence to proof that the societies marginalize the Black.

*In this war der are people who refuse
to hear de shout
for human rights to be regarded
as a basic right*

(Poem 2, stanza 6)

This stanza is further strengthening the argument about the societies' felony. Irony gives contribution to expose that the white societies really ignore the Black. They do not care about what happen to the Black, weather it is hurt, suffer or torture. They prefer to be silent and act as if everything is fine. Surely, this is a felony because it is not fair for the Black. Perhaps, it makes the white societies feel proud and happy, the more they see the Black humiliated, the more they feel that they are in a respectable degree.

Second, the act of felony by the societies can be seen from how they kill the Black. It is exposed by the following quotation:

*The death of Stephen Lawrence
Has taught us
That we cannot let the illusion of freedom
Endow us with a false sense of security as we walk the streets,*

(Poem 3, 4)

Unlike the recent quotation, this stanza is analyzed by using repetition. In fact, the sentence */The death of Stephen Lawrence/* is repeated three times in the poem. The aim of this repetition is to strengthen about the death of Stephen Lawrence. It is very ridiculous since it is enacted in public area. It means people who are watching the incident just ignore it, nobody wants to help. It seems killing the Black is a common thing to do. Furthermore, it also can be seen from the stanza that the black people live in fear and insecure feeling. Their life can be lost anytime without any logic reason.

Clearly, the analysis of the societies' felony is done by using imagery, irony, and repetition. This poetic elements expose that the societies do participate in committing felony toward the Black. They also give contribution to reveal the barbaric and unfair treatment of the white societies toward the Black. Surely, it ends up with the Black's suffering. In this analysis, the societies commit their felony in two ways; marginalize the Black, and even worst, they also kill the Black.

D. CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS

Five poems by Benjamin Zephaniah entitled *The Death of Joy Gardner* (1996), *Dis Policeman Keeps on Kicking Me to Death* (1989), *What Stephen Lawrence Has Taught Us* (1999), *Biko the Greatness* (2001) and *Walking Black Home* (1999) reflect the issue of the White's felony. The felony in this analysis is

enacted by the white people toward the Black. These poems are analyzed by using the concept of Otherness by Edward Said in post-colonial approach. It also uses poetic elements such as imagery, irony and repetition to reveal the meaning behind the five poems. In this analysis, the White's felony is enacted by the policemen, parliament members and the societies. The only reason behind this felony is because the white people consider the Black as *Other*. Here, it can be seen that the perception of *Otherness* is very dangerous. It mostly ends up by torturing and even killing *the Other*.

Note: This article is written based on the Fitri Handayani's thesis under the supervision of Dr. Kurnia Ningsih, M.A., 1st advisor, and Desvalini Anwar, S.S., M.Hum, Ph.D., 2nd advisor.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Hardianti, RiaResky. (2016). *Racism Reflected in Maya Angelou's Poem*. Universitas Sembilan belas November Kolakas.
- Said, Edward W. (1993). *Culture and Imperialism*. New York: Knopf.
- Staszak, Jean Francois. (2008). *Other/Otherness*. International Encyclopedia of Human Geography: Elsevier.
- Vidasicova, Barbora. (2015). *Immigrant Experience in West Indian British Poetry*. Palacky University Olomouc.
- Zephaniah, Benjamin. (1989). *Dis Policeman Keeps On Kicking Me To Death: Rasta*. Switzerland: Workers Playtime.
- Zephaniah, Benjamin. (1996). *The Death of Joy Gardner: Propa Propaganda*. UK: Bloodaxe.
- Zephaniah, Benjamin. (1999). *Walking Black Home: Funky Turkeys*. UK: ABM.
- Zephaniah, Benjamin. (1999). *What Stephen Lawrence Has Taught Us*. Poem Hunter.
- Zephaniah, Benjamin. (2001). *Biko the Greatness: Too Black Too Strong*. UK: Bloodaxe.
- _____. British Council. (2018). *Benjamin Zephaniah*. UK: British Council Global. Web. September 7, 2017.