

Racism towards African American in Peter Farrelly's *Green Book*: A True Story

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Abstract

The aim of the research was to describe the racial discrimination towards African-American in *Green Book*, a movie by Peter Farelly. The movie was based on a true story of social life in America during the reign of Jim Crow Laws in 1962. Therefore, the writer used descriptive qualitative method with sociological approach in order to describe the racism act towards colored people in America at that periodical time as depicted in the movie. The research indicated that the historical context of Jim Crow Laws, racial discrimination, the distinction of White and Colored people were reflected in the movie as it is in history. The racial injustice plot was climb up in every states where the concert was held. They went to one region to another further into Deep South. From the first region to the last one, the discrimination kept on increasing from bad to the worst form of racism.

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INTRODUCTION

Once in United State, there was a law called as *Jim Crow Laws* enforced until 1965. This law separated the African Americans with white Americans in using the public facilities such as roads, drinking fountains, restaurants, transportations, hotels, public schools, and many others. In case of humanity and human rights, this is considered as unequal social order however a “separate but equal” stigma for Americans in this period.

As this stigma was normal for white people, while none of Americans nor African Americans believed the word “equal” but the “separate” part was uphold by the Americans faithfully. As in case of segregation, the principal using of sign “white” and “colored” were found

in almost all public facilities as the reign of Jim Crow Laws (Gardner, 2012). Views as “colored” waiting room or “white only” toilet were commonly found everywhere. This is a very severe form of racial discrimination.

In another word, racial discrimination called as racism which widely known refer to black or dark-skinned people determine an African descendant, sometimes mentioned as colored people. Vidal (1996) stated that racism is a form of violent towards another race as an act of domination involving specific behaviors or actions. In Racism, one group of race looks down to another group of race which result superior and inferior feeling. This is one of racism forms resulted by Jim Crow Laws.

The poor thing about racism caused by *Jim Crow Laws* was the different quality of public facilities. White people got the better quality. Not

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only that, but also in designation as in Brown & Stantiford (2008), the differentiation to addressed white man as “Mister” while colored people as “boy” or “Negro” in newspaper. Another dark injustice for African American would be served last. If they had a job, the pay would be little. Even in public places, African American should give way or prioritize the Americans. This is felt terrible, but a racial segregation was indeed legal at that time.

This grief adheres the racial stereotype of African American. They were associated with dirty-skinned people and lowly workers as in Takezawa (1999), stereotypical occupation for colored men were porter, cook, janitor and servant, while for colored women were cook and housemaid. This indicates the narrow point of view shown by racist, social economic inequality, and the unfair of life as well.

Those realities influenced author of literary works to involve the historical context or phenomenon into a form of literary works. Mostly, those were about how Americans treated African Americans. As it is reflected in *Green Book* movie directed by Peter Farelly. This movie mirrors historical context of discrimination happened in the period as the reign of *Jim Crow Laws*. For movie reviewers, this is a great movie which won the Oscar and earned prestige in Toronto Film Festival.

Green Book was a true story film set in 1962 which script written by Nick Vallelonga, a son of Tony Vallelonga whose story is being filmed as stated in *Variety* by Wagmeister (2019). Nick wrote the story of his father, Tony Vallelonga who worked to a great African American composer named Dr. Don Shirley. *Green Book* actually a symbol of a guidance book entitled “for Negro motorist, *Green Book* for Vacation without Aggravation.” This book was for sale for black people containing information about hotel, restaurant, or places where black people would be accepted. The existence of this book shows how racist people at the period where black people would always find life threatening situation in daily life.

The movie which also the true story told about the struggling of Dr. Don Shirley as a colored people but a great and rich composer was fighting with his pride to change the paradigm on skin color. Therefore, he decided to make a tour concert to southern America where the discrimination felt deeply. Thus, the two great values contained in the movie which representing the historical context and filming based on true story set in 1962 became the prominent factors that made the writer interested in describing the racial discrimination or racism in *Green Book* towards African American.

This analysis was also conducted by referring to previous studies and analysis from numbers of authors as Pager & Western (2012) in his writing about identifying discrimination and Rahmatillah (2020) in her analysis of *The Reflection of Racism Towards African American in Selma Movie*.

METHODS

The writer used used qualitative method as Mohajan (2018) stated that qualitative research is a form of social action that stresses on the way of people interpret, and make sense of their experiences to understand the social reality of individuals. Then, applying the sociological approach in order to describe the phenomenon of racism based on true story as reflected in this movie. As Elizabeth & Burns (1973) stated that sociological approach shows the relation between literature and society which literature is the product of society and reciprocally. Therefore, concerning to sociology of literature means to pull the red string between literary work and its sociological context, society, place, culture, economy, and many other aspects.

It was conducted through this method in order to describe the whole phenomenon of true story happened in 1962. The purpose is being able to reflect the historical aspects of 1962 situations in America within the movie descriptively.

While the data sources were primary data and secondary data. The primary data was collected from the dialogues and circumstances in

the movie of *Green Book* directed by Peter Farelly in 2018 based on true story of Tony Vallelonga and Dr. Don Shirley in 1962 which script written by Tony's son, Nick Vallelonga. Meanwhile, the secondary data was taken from historical books, journals, encyclopedia, and internet articles as well.

There were several steps in collecting the data. For primary data, the writer watched the whole movie first in order to get the sense of racism depicted in the movie as objective of the research. Then re-watched the movie while taking note of the scenes that reflected the racism and marked the time of the dialogues. After that, the writer read and typed the script that related to racism in order to classify the related data.

For secondary data, the writer conducted library research, reading, internet browsing, comprehending then taking note of the information related to the subject matter.

Besides, there were several steps in analyzing the data. The first was classification through classifying the collected data as for primary data, the writer did characterization by character mapping and relating the narrative which is a way to see how the setting related to the narrative (the reasons for certain background, set, location chosen). Next step was interpreting the string between primary and secondary data used qualitative data analysis as in Mikos (2014) suggest it in analyzing film. Then explaining and concluding the results.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The research result will be presented orderly as in the movie. The data shown are only dialogues and circumstances related to racial discrimination toward African American.

Tony : "What the hell are you all guys doing here?"

Dolores brother : "We came over to keep Dolores company."

Dolores's Father : "Tony! Don't be sleeping when my daughter is here alone with these sacks of coal."

...

Tony : "I don't know they were going to send eggplants".

(Time 00:07:30→00:07:48/*Green Book*)

Above scene took place at Tony's house where there were two black plumbers came to repair something. It shows how white people think of black people (African American). In racism, such act called as prejudice towards African American. They thought that these colored people would harm white people so it is necessary to be aware. They even called these black people with bad term as sacks of coal which means that black people are dirty as sacks of coal even Tony threw his glass that being used by these two plumbers as it is something that very dirty and cannot be cleaned. This prejudice harms this racial group as if they are something that does not deserve to use things that being used by white people. This phenomenon portrayed in the movie as it was happened in reality when Jim Crow Laws was in the country.

The beginning of this movie actually shows the difficult situation of people in earning money and finding a job. At first, Tony worked at Copacabana, a famous restaurant with music shows. Then it was closed for reparation which took quite long time while Tony should earn money for his family. The hardness of life made him accept an offer to be a driver in concert tour for black pianist, Dr. Don Shirley. He needed the money, so he accepted it. Then the tour began to Midwest and Deep South. The tour was equipped with a guidance book entitled "for Negro motorist, *Green Book* for Vacation without Aggravation." This book was for sale for black people containing information about hotel, restaurant, or places where black people would be accepted.

The existence of this book shows how racist people were! Black people would always find life threatening situation in daily life. The writer sees that the intention of Dr. Don Shirley team in using a strong white driver is to keep Dr. Shirley save. This shows racism distress situation where African American people unable to solve this racial problem that they had to dealt with causing them to find a way out as portrayed in this movie. Luckily, Tony was in difficult financial situation therefore he accepted the offer,

if not, then it was impossible finding such situation as white people would work for black people. Even, friends of Tony or other white people found it strange situation.

Actually, the beginning was not easy for Tony to get rid of general discrimination toward black people. It is shown in act Time (00:34:30/*Green Book*) when Tony wanted to drop by to take a leak, he came back to get his wallet. He thought that Dr. Shirley might do something with his wallet. This is another prejudice of African American which commonly happened in America in the period. Here, the writer sees that the discrimination views toward African American possessed deeply inside white people's mind. It is determined by Tony's act in this scene where he already worked to Dr. Shirley who was a very rich person. It means wealth cannot even cover racialism.

This also shown in time (00:35:05/*Green Book*) when they arrived in Pennsylvania, in the scene Dr. Don Shirley was alone while his another trio (parts of his music group) were having fun with girls. Dr. Shirley was the only colored in his group. Therefore, he knew that he would not have such occasion to socialize with white people. His group also realized it that they never invite Dr. Shirley because being seen with colored people was something unusual. It is clearly a form of racial discrimination. Negro stereotype would always attach to any African American. As it is seen in below dialogues:

Tony : "You know this song?"

Dr. Shirley : "I don't think so, No"

Tony : "How could you not know this music? Aretha Franklin. Chubby Checker, Little I mean come on Doc, these are your people."

(Time 00:43:38→00:43:51/*Green Book*).

Above dialogue concern on "your people" part which made Dr. Shirley quiet and looked deep in the distance. This is another racial stereotype. For white people, colored people must have known another colored people because they thought that they were one type of racial community without thinking that it might cause anxiety towards colored people. Even so, Dr.

Don Shirley took care of all harassment calmly as shown below:

Dr. Shirley : "I've never heard fried chicken in my life."

Tony : "Who you bullshitting?" You people love the fried chicken, the grits, and the collard greens. Negro cooks used to make it all the time when I was in the army."

Dr. Shirley : "You have a very narrow assessment of me, Tony."

(Time 00:51:30→00:51:45/*Green Book*).

From above circumstance, the writer points out the word "you people" and "Negro cooks" which mean that Tony classified which food for black people and for American. He considered that all black people like the same thing. Saying "you people" imply that Dr. Shirley and Tony were not the same people. This shows there is an exclusion happened in the society as reflected in the America at that time. White people strictly exclude themselves from what belongs to colored people. At one moment, after keeping quiet all the time when Dr. Shirley was insinuated, he said,

Dr. Shirley : "I just needed some air".

Tony : "Air? Do you know where you are?"

Dr. Shirley : "Does geography really matter?"

Tony : "What?"

Dr. Shirley : "If I was in a bar in your neighborhood, would the conversation be any different?" (Time 00:59:22→00:59:41/*Green Book*).

This situation happened when they were in Louisville Kentucky, when Dr. Shirley got hit by several locals at a bar. This was because he went alone and without *Green Book* instruction. The role of *Green Book* as a guidance for colored people was really important in order to be save as it is happened in the true story. Without it, colored people should be prepared with negative stereotypes and prejudice. Even they could easily hit by white people. Hence, the guidance book implied that there was restriction between places that could be reached out by African American. As in (00:53:20/*Green Book*) a group of white people who hit Dr. Shirley said, "Who let him out his cage?". This is very rude and a severe humiliation towards African American which considered them as animal. This is an aggressive

suppression over colored people. During this period, colored people were powerless to against such violence. These white people were the dominant capitalist society which means that colored people were always inferior community over white people who were the superior one. From the dialogues, the writer also assumes that no matter where Dr. Shirley was, as long as he is an African American, such thing would always happen.

Tragically, all colored people seemed to believe that they will always be as lower class and despicable toward white people. This case is portrayed in circumstances time (01:01:20→01:02:40/*Green Book*) when Dr. Shirley's car got over heated and they had to stop to water it in plantation area where there were many black people hoeing the soil as lowly workers. Those negro workers were astonished by the view where Tony as a white man fixing the car and plain dressing while Dr. Shirley as a negro standing there crossing arms in a tuxedo. Even, Tony got the car door for Dr. Shirley. This looked as an impossible view for them. They could not believe their eyes, a white man work for a Negro where this whole time historically Negro was slave, poor, dirty creature and will always be. Colored people realized their lowest racial status. Thus, the level of racism was this bad. They did not even proud of the view of Tony driving Dr. Shirley. Even for them, that was a strange thing which indicated that negative assessment had also come from colored people. They had no self-esteem toward themselves. This racial discrimination keeps appearing in every region of the tour. Even the climax is starting from below circumstances:

The host : "Earlier this week we asked our help what Mr. Shirley might like for supper. So the boys in the kitchen whipped up a special menu in honor of our guest. Gentlemen, Home-cooked fried chicken."

(Time 01:03:50→01:04:10/*Green Book*).

From this dialogue, the writer sees people's general perspective about African American was helpless. The tour set up far into south area but still Dr. Shirley got the same discrimination. In this scene, Tony gestured to Dr. Shirley as if

saying "*see? I am right.*" Again, the stereotype of African American widely known all over America even in the deep South. But this is not the only harassment from this white-skinned host. The most terrible thing is when no one sees this host with Dr. Shirley.

Host : "Excuse me, Don. ...Are you looking for the commode?"

Dr. Shirley : "Yes, I ..."

Host : "Yeah, here. Let me help you. It's right out there before that pine."

Dr. Shirley : "I'd prefer not to use that."

Host : "Well, don't be silly, Don. It looks a lot worse from the outside."

Dr. Shirley : "and I supposed you know from the experience. .. Well I could return to my motel and use the facilities there but that would take at least a half an hour."

Host : "We don't mind waiting." (Time 01:04:52→01:05:33/*Green Book*)

This shows how terrible the way white people treating the black people. This is clearly shows the stereotype of Jim Crow Laws where toilet for colored and white people should be distinguished. The host did not allow Dr. Shirley use the toilet but a wooden old commode beside the tree outside of the house which was very dirty and dark. Commode also means convenient. This implies that the host showing him a toilet which might be convenient for Dr. Shirley. This is a humiliation towards other race. This behavior in American social culture was justification for them. They thought that they were superior than colored people that they could act abusively. Even greatest talent and wealth of a Negro cannot cover the discrimination. For white people, they were all the same, slaves, dirty and criminalist which was fine if threatened as bad as this. Where at that time, only poor people and animal that would take a leak under or beside a tree. They can even wait for so long than just allowing Dr. Shirley to use the toilet. The next day in the next city, this thing got worse.

Tony : "You like that, Doc?"

Dr. Shirley : "That's a handsome suit"

...

Tony : "Why don't you try it on? ... Come on let's see how it looks on you. We got plenty of time. (gong into the store).

Tailor : "How you doing, may I help you, Sir?"

Tony : "Yeah, we want to try on that beautiful gray suit in the window. You got it in 42?"

Tailor : "Of Course. This is the one. Dressing room is in the back, Sir."

Dr. Shirley : "Thank You. I'll be just a moment."

Tony : "Take your time, Doc. I'll check out some ties for you."

Tailor : "Excuse me, you are not allowed to try that on."

Dr. Shirley : "I beg your pardon."

Tailor : "If you'd like to purchase it first, we'd be happy to tailor it to your needs."

Dr. Shirley : "I see"

(Time 01:11:03→01:12:16/*Green Book*).

Above circumstance indicates that even for a tailor who earn money through selling also discriminate Negro's capability financially. This tailor doubted black people for being afford to buy such suit. This is stated in above dialogue when the tailor said that he will tailor it to Dr. Shirley if he purchased it first. It means that the tailor suspecting Dr. Shirley would only try and left without buying it for all knows that Negroes were extremely poor. If so, the suite would not be sold for being dirty and disgusted by a Negro body. Again, this discrimination is clearly a direct discrimination where this tailor served Tony well while he refused to serve Dr. Shirley. This is depicted in Jim Crow Laws in this period where there were distinctive places where American and African American were not proper to be served in the same place especially for using such high-class suite. Poor Dr. Shirley, he managed the emotion well because he knew that his race was powerless over this white people.

As an indirect discrimination caused by the role of Jim Crow Laws, white people had great power to organize condition. It did not mean that Dr. Shirley was weak or emotionless. He indeed was mourning deep inside his heart. It is shown in time (01:12:30/*Green Book*) when Dr. Shirley did his concert in that city emotionally reflecting deep sadness, pain, disappointment, and anger in his music. He was so angry for previous humiliation that he accepted. The anger and sorrow portrayed clearly in his expression and music while doing his concert.

Besides all above discrimination, Dr. Shirley still accepted another exclusion act by police officer when he was caught intimately with another white man. Dr. Shirley got hit by the police officer while another white man did not. Of course it is a form of racial injustice. Not only violence act, but also physical humiliation was also depicted in this movie as in time (01:17:11/*Green Book*) when Tony and Dr. Shirley coincidentally met Tony's acquaintance. These friends of Tony said "*who's the eggplant?*". From this dialogue indicates that physical humiliation was also happened in the movie. Eggplant texture and color is dark and slick which similar to the skin of colored people, shiny black.

As a low racial status, African American forced to never try to make them-selves equal to white people because they did not deserve it. This is shown in time (01:21:15/*Green Book*) when Dr. Shirley told Tony about what his record company said to him was "*They insisted that audiences would never accept a Negro pianist on a classical stage*". This means as if white people think that they were a noble race while colored people was slavery race therefore colored people did not deserve for noble thing such as classical stage of music because that music considered as the noble kind of music, the masterpiece. It only belongs to white people. Colored people only deserved ugly thing.

This kind of situation kept going on in each city, even when they were in traffic light looked old by white people in time (01:23:45→01:24:00/*Green Book*). The view of Tony as white man driving Dr. Shirley as a Negro shocked people there. The worst was the police officers who supposed to uphold onto the law and human rights. It is shown below:

Police : "And why are you driving him?"

Tony : "He's my boss".

Police : "He can't be out here at night.

This is a sundown town. Get him out of the car and check his ID."What kind of name is that? (asking Tony's last name).

Tony : "It's Italian."

Police : "I see. That's why you are driving him around. You're half a nigger yourself.)

(Time 01:25:47→01:01:26:39/*Green Book*).

Above situation signifies that impossible for white people driving black people who known for their miserable life. Therefore, knowing that Tony was an Italian, the police officer accused him as a half-negro then the boss-driver thing just made sense to the police. This indicates that does not matter where a Negro were and what his occupation was, he will always be stereotyped by dirty, poor, dark disgusting skin, and lowly people. Of course, Tony and Dr. Shirley got arrested. When in jail, Dr. Shirley said that they could not be arrested without any cause, then the police said the cause was “cause you let the sun set on your black ass” (Time 01:27:21/*Green Book*). This is a clear form of racial humiliation. But in this period, colored people had no power to fight white people. Being humiliated physically is a direct discrimination.

One of smart way in presenting the racial discrimination situation in reality in America in 1962 was well performed in the movie as in time (01:30:42/*Green Book*), there was a plank written “Whites only within city limits after dark”, this plank shows the law discriminate the colored people. Indirectly, they were accusing colored people who going out during night time indicated as suspect of criminal. While if white people being seen at night would not be suspected as easy as colored people got. It was a common view for people finding such plank which shows distinctive rights for American and African American. It could be in the form of warning planks or specifically signs for “white only” and “colored”.

Another way of discrimination was separation area between black people and white people indicates injustice for black people. White people would not get any problem for going to Negro people places but on the contrary, as it is shown in time (01:34:22/*Green Book*) where Tony stayed at hotel for colored people accompany Dr. Shirley. Also, in time (01:44:59/*Green Book*) when they went to colored people restaurant, Black people shown no sign to Tony for not going into their places. The black bartender served Tony as serving other black people. On the

contrary, Dr. Shirley would not allow for having dinner in hotel restaurant where he performed.

Dr. Shirley : “There, some people of mine.”, (pointing at Tony and his trio’s table).

Waitress : “You can’t come in here.”

Tony : “Hey, what’s going on?”

Dr. Shirley : “This.. Gentleman says that I’m not permitted to dine here.”

Tony : “No, You don’t understand. He’s playing tonight. He’s the main event”.

Waitress : “I’m sorry but it is the policy of the restaurant.”

Manager : “Everything all right?”

Tony : “No, it’s not all right. This guy saying Dr. Shirley can’t eat here.”

Manager : “Well, I apologize, but these are long standing tradition, club rules. I’m sure you understand.”

Dr. Shirley : “No, I do not understand. In 45 minutes, I will be right up there on that stage entertaining your guests, yet I can’t eat here?”

Manager : “I, I’m sorry.”

Tony : “Wait a minute, are you telling me the bozos in his band and all these people who came here to see him play, they can eat here, but the star of the show, the parking spot of honor, he can’t?”

Manager : “I’m afraid not.”

Tony : “Well, he’s gotta eat. I mean his gotta have dinner.”

Manager : “Okay, I’ll tell you what. Why don’t we bring something to his dressing room? John, show him a menu.”

Dr. Shirley : “No, I’m not eating in that storage room.”

Manager : “Okay, well if you prefer, there’s a very popular establishment right down the road, the Orange Bird. They’d be happy to feed you.” (Time 01:40:14→01:41:43/*Green Book*).

Above scene was the closure of discrimination shown in the movie. The situation represented a clear racial violence toward Dr. Shirley as black people. Once again, a great talent and an honor job status did not make Dr. Shirley became an honor guest even at the place where he was invited to perform a concert. After all, The color of skin blinded great talent, well behavior, and wealth. A doctor degree could not change people’s perspective of dirty-skinned people. Besides not allowing Dr. Shirley to dine in, they also did not prepare a proper room for Dr. Shirley. They only gave him a small messy closet in the kitchen for him to get prepared for his

concert. White people deeply took over control rights and status of another race.

Actually, Dr. Don Shirley knew that he would be dealt with racial problems in this tour concert. But he intended to do so in order to change the stigma of White people toward Colored people through his great talent as composer. He thought that great talent, well-manner (unlike Negro's manner stereotype) and wealth might be could change the stigma of White people. Even though, the result was only pain. The research result will be presented orderly as in the movie. The data shown are only dialogues and circumstances related to racial discrimination toward African American.

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Dolores brother : "We came over to keep Dolores company."

Dolores's Father: "Tony! Don't be sleeping when my daughter is here alone with these sacks of coal.

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Above scene took place at Tony's house where there were two black plumbers came to repair something. It shows how white people think of black people (African American). In racism, such act called as prejudice towards African American. They thought that these colored people would harm white people so it is necessary to be aware. They even called these black people with bad term as sacks of coal which means that black people are dirty as sacks of coal even Tony threw his glass that being used by these two plumbers as it is something that very dirty and cannot be cleaned. This prejudice harms this racial group as if they are something that does not deserve to use things that being used by white people. This phenomenon portrayed in the movie as it was happened in reality when Jim Crow Laws was in the country.

CONCLUSION

Based on research result, the writer concluded that racial discrimination towards

African American indeed happened and depicted in *Green Book* movie. It is based on true story of Tony Vallelonga and Dr. Don Shirley's experience. The historical context of Jim Crow Laws, racial discrimination, the distinction of White and Colored people were reflected in the movie as it is in history. Mostly, it was about the distinctive places, areas, facilities, quality of goods between American and African American which tragically against racial discrimination. The interesting part is the plot of discrimination experienced by Dr. Don Shirley as an African American.

The racial injustice plot was climb up in every states were the concert was held. They went to one region to another further into Deep South. From the first region to the last one, the discrimination kept on increasing from bad to worst form of racism. After all, this research was not to accuse someone for behaving as a racist, but to become a further reference for another researcher.

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